

LES GAITES DE LA JEUNE MARIANNE:  
FRENCH COMIC THEATRE 1870-1900

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Neil Carruthers

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## INTRODUCTION

There can be no doubt about how important the theatre was to the French in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Objective indications of the fact may be seen in the constantly increasing number of theatres which were able to earn a living in Paris, the published reports of the annual takings of the leading playhouses and the very considerable fortunes made by the most favoured dramatists and actors.

We also have the testimony of eye-witnesses, like Henry James who wrote in the New York Tribune:

That the theatre plays in Paris a larger part in people's lives than it does anywhere else is by this time a fact too well established to need especial comment. It is one of the first facts that comes under the observation of the resident foreigner, who very soon perceives that the theatre is an essential part of French civilization, in regard to which it keeps up a lively process of action and reaction. It is not a mere amusement, as it is in other countries; it is an interest, an institution, connected through a dozen doors with literature, art and society.  
(29 January 1876)

The opinion of an intelligent and cultured outsider, able to make trustworthy comparisons with other countries, is particularly cogent, perhaps; but it is quite clear that the French themselves were also conscious of the scale of their national enthusiasm for the stage. An article in the Revue d'Art Dramatique by Léon Noël in 1888 began with the observation:

Notre époque est portée vers l'art dramatique; cette forme littéraire a le don d'intéresser les foules, aussi bien le public raffiné que le public illettré qui, en sortant du théâtre, déclare s'être amusé.

On joue la comédie non seulement dans les salons, mais aussi dans les cercles et, depuis quelques années, des sociétés d'amateurs se sont fondées aussi bien à Paris qu'en province et à l'étranger, pour donner des représentations



dramatiques, et le goût du théâtre se répand de plus en plus...

In a report in the same magazine the following year,

"Mairobert" confirmed:

Le goût du jour est à la comédie. On la joue non seulement dans les théâtres parisiens, mais dans le monde....,

and Frédéric Henriet opened his Monographie du spectateur au théâtre in 1892 with the words

Jamais le théâtre n'a pris une plus grande place qu'aujourd'hui dans les plaisirs parisiens.

How the professional man of letters regarded the theatre is perhaps of some interest because we have generally been accustomed to consider the drama as the least important of the major literary genres practised in France at this time. The period appears to be characterized by the continued and increasing pre-eminence of the novel, unless it is by the efflorescence of lyric poetry in the work of Baudelaire and his successors, the Parnassians and the Symbolists. Even the historians, philosophers, moralists, critics and essayists of the period have some interest for us, numbering such names as Bergson, Renan and Taine. By comparison, drama seems to offer very little which is important or interesting to us as literature.

Yet it is striking how many poets and, even more particularly, novelists who were established and successful in their own genre were tempted to write for the stage. If we remember the names of Théodore de Banville, François Coppée, Catulle Mendès or Jean Richepin at all, it is probably as poets, but in their own day they were almost as well known as playwrights. Among the novelists and the short-story writers, talents as eminent and diverse as Flaubert, Zola,

Edmond de Goncourt, Daudet, Maupassant, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Renard attempted to write for the theatre, with very varied degrees of success.

As far as can be judged from the comments of writers such as Renard, the attraction of writing plays was two-fold. In the first place, it was considered that playwrights enjoyed a greater degree of public recognition than novelists. Renard, for instance, thought by adapting the successful Poil de Carotte for the stage to attain a celebrity of another order entirely. Secondly, it was believed that large fortunes were to be made by writing plays, as was indeed the case with popular dramatists like Sardou, Rostand, Capus or Porto-Riche. We may tend to think of French literature in the late nineteenth century as dominated by novelists à gros tirages, such as Daudet, Zola and Anatole France, but book sales were falling in the Nineties, in fact, and in 1893 only six novelists attained 10,000 francs in sales.

Success as a playwright thus promised a degree of fame and fortune enough to interest even the most eminent novelists, and apart from those like Barbey d'Aurevilly and Huysmans who disliked the theatre, most attempted at least one play. As Zola remarked - with satisfaction - in 1880:

C'est une véritable invasion du théâtre par les romanciers.

Yet although the stage obviously held a special importance for French society towards the end of the century, for a long time little scholarly interest was shown in the theatre of this period, and this neglect was most marked with respect to the comic plays which had been by far the most popular, numerous and perhaps characteristic of its

productions.

Le théâtre comique français du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle est  
la Cendrillon de la critique universitaire,

wrote Pierre Haffter in 1972; and the observation was perfectly justified when it was uttered, and at the time this study was undertaken.

Since then, however, the situation has changed very considerably. What had remained for some half a century a little-known area of theatrical history has been partly charted by a series of excellent studies on individual playwrights and directors: the work of Soupault's successors, including Jacqueline Autruseau, Pierre Haffter himself and Leonard Pronko, on Labiche; Maurice Descotes' book on Becque; the writings of O.G. Brockett, Francis Pruner, J.B. Sanders and André Veinstein, which have put the study of Antoine on a scholarly footing; the conjoined efforts of scholars associated with Les Cahiers naturalistes to illuminate Naturalism's neglected playwrights; Pierre Bornecque's mighty volume on Courteline; the excellent work done on Feydeau since Norman Shapiro's pioneering studies by Stuart Baker, Henry Gidel, Jacques Lorcey, Leonard Pronko and Arlette Shenkan, among others; while those who have added to our knowledge of Jarry over the last two decades are simply too numerous to mention.

Adopting a different, synoptic approach, this study attempts to survey the French comedy of the years 1870-1900 in its general outlines, with a two-fold objective: to trace developments in drama and in theatrical practice during the period, insofar as they affected comedy; and to gain an insight into the preoccupations, tastes, and attitudes of

those who made up its audiences, in some modest measure supplementing Maurice Descotes's valued Le Public de théâtre et son histoire (1964), which covered the period up to 1865. It takes as its premiss the truth of Henry James' observation of 1872:

It is impossible to spend many weeks in Paris without observing that the theatre plays a very important part in French civilization; and it is impossible to go much to the theatre without finding it a copious source of instruction as to French ideas, manners, and philosophy.

A first part outlines the general conditions under which comedy was written and performed in Paris between 1870 and 1900 touching on the degree of liberty, the theatrical outlets and the dramatic forms available to the comic dramatist. The second treats individually some representative authors of comic drama, some already established by 1870, others new talents. In view of the recent work in this area noted above, the author has felt absolved - if not inhibited - from addressing the subjects those writers have treated with such scholarly thoroughness and skill. Playwrights such as Feydeau, or directors like Antoine, who have benefitted from their expert attention have been included here only because their presence was needed to complete chains of development. If anything, a preference has been given to playwrights who were popular in their day but are now overlooked. The third section, dealing with the subjects of comedy, isolates a few topics characteristic of or particularly relevant to the period; while the conclusion endeavours to draw these disparate elements into a synthesis, suggesting general trends discernible in French comedy and its public in the course of these thirty years.

A final word about the delimitation of the area studied.

This enquiry has been restricted to dramatic works with a significant comic element. Lyric genres are therefore outside its scope, and if the vaudeville à couplets is included while comic opera and operetta are not, it is on the basis that in vaudeville the dialogue rather than the music is the predominant element. The monologue, which reached its peak of popularity during this period, has also been passed over. Because of the requirement that the comic element be significant, the comédie dramatique and plays of a mixed nature of the type represented by most of Sardou's comédies were excluded, as (with regret) was the féerie. Conversely, a few works described as pièces have been admitted when a subjective assessment has suggested a substantial comic intention.

The starting date chosen for the survey was the end of the Second Empire, because it seemed reasonable to expect that so radical a change of regime would bring political and possibly social changes which might be reflected in the theatre. More important, though, in the author's view, were the successive shocks of the military defeat by the Prussians and the divisive revolt of the Paris Commune, which produced a serious crisis in national self-confidence. This seemed to raise interesting questions as to whether the French theatre-goer would continue to laugh at the same things and in the same way as before.

On the other hand, the terminal date of 1900 was more or less arbitrarily chosen, simply rounding out three decades from the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of the Empire. Cultural epochs are quite independent of century divisions, of course, and this period actually comprised two

phases, perhaps, seamlessly joined by a gradual transition: the aftermath of the Année Terrible, and what has been called the avant-siècle, the prelude to that Belle Epoque into which it evolved without any significant break in continuity.

For all that, Frenchmen of the time seem themselves to have invested 1900 with a certain significance as a symbolic turning-point, a notion which was implied both in that great stock-taking of civilization which was the Exposition Universelle and in the concept of the Fin de siècle, of which Jacques Chastenet has written in his Histoire de la Troisième République:

'Fin de siècle...' A partir d'environ 1893, l'expression se rencontre constamment dans les livres, dans les journaux, au théâtre, dans les conversations. Elle ne constate pas seulement un fait chronologique; elle prétend exprimer un état d'âme collectif, refléter un stade de civilisation.

THEATRICAL CENSORSHIP 1871-1900.

Some understanding of the nature and extent of stage censorship between 1871 and 1900 is clearly a relevant preliminary to our enquiry. The validity of any inference drawn from what dramatists chose to write is naturally affected by any constraints placed on what they were allowed to write.

1. History and Structure.

Throughout almost all the period under consideration, the Republic applied a system of stage censorship which derived from that which had operated under the Second Republic and Second Empire since the loi du 30 juillet 1850 re-established dramatic censorship in France.<sup>1</sup>

This had been of two kinds: "preventive" censorship, of dramatic texts, was exercised by a Commission d'examen des ouvrages dramatiques; while "repressive" censorship, of produced plays, was carried out by an Inspection des théâtres.

The first was abolished shortly after the proclamation of the republic by a decree of September 30th 1870, signed by all members of the interim Gouvernement de la Défense Nationale at the proposal of Jules Simon, which stated:

La commission d'examen des ouvrages dramatiques  
est et demeure supprimée.

The Inspection des théâtres was dissolved three months later. Thus theatrical censorship had been abolished by the end of 1870.

This freedom proved to be short-lived, however, and of hardly more than theoretical interest. A decree of September 7th had closed Parisian theatres, and, in the main, the major ones remained closed throughout the Prussian siege and did

not reopen until February 1871, only to close once more during the Commune troubles, from March 18th to late May.<sup>2</sup>

The author of the anonymous La Censure dramatique (1873) - Jules Bonnassies, in fact - gives this account of the circumstances in which the Commission was reinstated:

A l'entrée de l'armée de Versailles,<sup>3</sup> le maréchal Mac-Mahon, usant des pouvoirs qu'il croyait tenir de l'état de siège, et prévenu, selon toute apparence, par des malins, la rétablit pour toute la durée du régime exceptionnel auquel Paris était soumis.<sup>4</sup>

Both Bonnassies and Albéric Cahuet, in his law thesis La Liberté du théâtre (1902), deny the legal validity of Mac-Mahon's action. However that may be, Jules Simon re-appointed certain former Imperial censors to their old posts, and the Commission resumed its functions.

Its existence was confirmed by a decree of February 1st 1874, which re-established the entire practice of stage censorship as it had been under the Second Empire, and this action was in effect ratified by the National Assembly when a vote for credits for censorship purposes was passed on June 24th of the same year.

Thus the practice, structure and sometimes even the personnel of Imperial stage censorship were rapidly reinstated by the Third Republic. Naturally, individuals criticized the system from time to time, but its continued existence was seriously threatened only once before 1900.

On January 19th 1891, the Ministre de l'Instruction Publique vetoed a new production at the Porte-Saint-Martin of La Fille Elisa, Jean Ajalbert's adaptation of Edmond de Goncourt's novel, originally created at the Théâtre-Libre on December 26th 1890.

Well-known theatrical and literary personalities, the



general public and the press joined their voices in protest. On January 24th, the Chambre des Députés debated a motion, introduced by Antonin Proust and Le Senne, powerfully supported by Alexandre Millerand, to abolish preventive censorship and to make stage plays subject merely to the Régime de droit commun.

The immediate outcome was the appointment of the 1891 commission on stage censorship. It heard submissions from Camille Doucet, Alexandre Dumas fils, Auguste Vacquerie, Emile Zola, Jean Richepin, Henry Meilhac, Alexandre Bisson, Emile Bergerat, Georges Ancey and Albin Valabrègue - all, to some extent, dramatists; Albert Carré and André Antoine, theatrical managers; the actor Edmond Got; Léon Bourgeois, Ministre de l'Instruction Publique et des Beaux-Arts; and M. Deloncle, sponsor of an attenuated amendment to Proust's original proposal.

In the event, after submissions had been heard, it was indeed the Deloncle amendment which was recommended by the commission; but their recommendation was not adopted by the Assembly, and the censorship system outlined above continued in operation throughout the remainder of the period under consideration here. Censorship was therefore a fact of life to be taken into consideration by all the dramatists whose work is discussed below.

## 2. Censorship and the Comic Stage.

The sort of principles which the Third Republic liked to imagine it applied to the responsibilities of censorship are well defined in a letter of February 26th 1879, in which Turquet,<sup>5</sup> sous-secrétaire d'Etat aux Beaux-Arts, laid down official guidelines for his dramatic censors:

Donnons, en politique, toute la liberté compatible avec le maintien de la paix publique et gardons toute notre sévérité pour les couplets licentieux et les pièces immorales, nous souvenant que les principes de la République sont la dignité et la liberté."

The comradely exhortation of the first person plural is rather engaging; and the principles invoked have a nice ring, despite the vagueness and question-begging of some of the terms. Unfortunately, the actual practice of the republican censors fell some way short of these ideals, on both counts.

## 2.i. Political Censorship.

Although, to be just, we must acknowledge that the Republic was generally much more tolerant of political heterodoxy and dissent than the Second Empire had been, between 1871 and 1900 a number of comedies overstepped the permitted bounds.

It must be recognized that political comedy, a risky genre under the previous regime, positively flourished under the Third Republic, and that the authorities often displayed a liberal tolerance of unsympathetic political views. Nevertheless, the Republic certainly used its powers on occasion to stifle politically embarrassing plays. In 1894, less than eighteen months after the Panama scandal had first broken, the censors forbade public performance of two plays about political corruption, Brieux' L'Engrenage and Barrès' Une Journée parlementaire, a manifest example of politically self-interested censorship.

The regime used its veto to curb both political extremes. Notwithstanding the controversial suppression of Sardou's Thermidor in 1891,<sup>6</sup> the censors were by no means Jacobin, any more than the republic they served, and sometimes a play

proved unacceptably radical.

Louis Marsolleau's one-act verse satire Mais quelqu'un troubla la fête is a sort of morality play, using abstract types to attack high finance, the Army, the Law, the Church, politicians, the demi-monde and the aristocracy, and ending with the menace of an eschatological proletarian revolution. It was to have opened at the Théâtre-Antoine on June 9th 1900, but at virtually the last minute the authorities intervened. The playwright's bitterness and a certain disillusion are evident even in the restraint of his terse prefatory note to the published text:

Cette pièce a été interdite en temps de République sous un ministère 'républicain'. Le directeur des Beaux-Arts s'appelait Roujon.

One of the most interesting forms of political interference with plays was what might be termed "diplomatic censorship", the control of unfavourable references to foreign nations which the government wished to conciliate. In the early years of the republic, for example, Thiers' censors prohibited Sardou's four-act comedy L'Oncle Sam, for fear of giving offence to the United States. When Mac-Mahon came to office, however, the ban was lifted, and L'Oncle Sam opened at the Vaudeville on November 6th 1873.<sup>7</sup>

L'Officier bleu, a four-act comedy by Ary Ercilaw, was more resolutely sacrificed to the Russian alliance which France was so painstakingly building up towards the 1894 treaty. The play portrayed the notorious Tsarist police, and offered a graphic account of an assassination attempt against the Tsar himself, a subject about which a Romanoff might well be sensitive: such attempts were made against Alexander II in 1866, 1867, 1878, 1879 and - successfully - in 1881. As so often happened, the proscribed play took

refuge in Brussels, where it was created in 1889.

It is beyond question, therefore, that comedies staged between 1871 and 1900 were subject to a certain measure of political censorship.

## 2.ii. Moral Censorship.

If they seem to us today somewhat over-cautious in judging what was

en politique, toute la liberté compatible avec  
la paix publique,

the Republic's watchdogs had even less signal success in curbing

les couplets licentieux et les pièces immorales.

The comedy of this period has come down to us as the epitome of the risqué, and this reputation is not wholly unfounded. Certainly the authorities did exercise their powers, from time to time, in the name of morality - witness the fifteen months' imprisonment imposed on Théodore de Chirac in 1891 for

outrage à la morale publique -

but they did so in an erratic and apparently arbitrary way.

That the very seriously-minded La Fille Elisa should be banned, as outlined earlier, while numerous more plainly smutty comedies were passed without let or hindrance might, perhaps, lend colour to the suspicion that political animus lay behind this partiality; but in any case the decisions of the censors were often puzzlingly inconsistent.

Having passed, for instance, Jaime and Noriac's La Timbale d'argent, a fairly irksome exposition of the thesis that sexual continence is good for the bel canto, why did the Inspection des théâtres then decide to close, after nine performances at the Menus-Plaisirs in December 1873, Busnach

and Liorat's opéra-comique, La Liqueur d'or, which is, to be sure, a cheap and heavy-handed piece, relying for its "humour" on grotesque Dutch names and a leering plot-line about pharmaceutically induced pregnancy, but not discernibly more indecent?

It also appears that the censors delayed production of Paul Ferrier's Au grand col (Palais-Royal, March 1877), a silly one-act comedy concerned with a wayward husband who has mislaid his drawers. Yet in itself it seems no more shocking than quantities of comedies which passed unimpeded and, as Zola rightly remarked, practically the most diverting thing about it is the playwright's ingenuity in consistently avoiding the word "caleçon".

If any pattern at all can be seen in the capricious practice of the censors, it is perhaps, a tendency to be more severe with serious treatments of indelicate subjects than with comic ones. Notwithstanding the examples we have noted, the censors usually tolerated a degree of permissiveness in comedy which was a byword abroad.

## 2. iii. Conclusion

In general, censorship weighed relatively lightly on French dramatists of this period, as compared, for example, with the controls imposed by the Lord Chancellor across the Channel, or indeed with censorship in France itself under the Second Empire.<sup>8</sup>

We should also take into account the fact that even when the censors banned a play from performance at the public theatres, the embargo was not necessarily absolute. The extended tolerance which the third Republic allowed the private or club theatres, whose audiences were invited or

subscribers, often made it possible for them to mount plays banned by the censors. Thus, for instance, Une Journée parlementaire was staged by the Théâtre-Libre and L'Engrenage by the Escholiers.<sup>9</sup>

Within generally quite liberal bounds, therefore, through the commercial or the club theatres, French comic dramatists of this period were able without very severe constraints to deal with such delicate issues as political corruption, unprincipled ambition in parliament and in the law-courts, legal anomalies, prostitution, promiscuity and adultery, and they frequently did so.

Theatrical Censorship: Footnotes

1. For stage censorship 1850-1870, see the anonymous La Censure sous Napoléon III; V. Hallays-Dabot, Histoire de la censure théâtrale en France; F.W.J. Hemmings, Culture and Society in France 1848-1898, 43-51; N. Carruthers, "Theatrical Censorship in Paris from 1850 to 1905"; P. Spencer, "Censorship of Literature under the Second Empire".
2. See A. Soubies, "Le Théâtre à Paris du 1er octobre 1870 au 31 décembre 1871"; E. Thierry, La Comédie-Française pendant les deux sièges (1870-71); La Censure dramatique, 31.
3. Actually, on 18 March.
4. La Censure dramatique, 31.
5. "Homme fameux dans l'histoire pour avoir voulu moraliser l'opérette et républicaniser le vaudeville." (F. Brunetière, Etudes critiques, 2, 285).
6. See Lemaître, Impressions, 6, 502ff; J. Victorien-Sardou, "Souvenirs d'une 'générale'", 50. On the other hand, the ban on Robert Halt's Madame Frainex in September 1872 and some of the cuts imposed on Flaubert's Le Candidat in 1874 curbed anti-royalist satires.
7. See A. Wolff, Victorien Sardou et l'Oncle Sam.
8. Descotes has pointed out, for example that: "En 1886, 6 interdictions seulement ont été, en tout et pour tout, prononcées". (Histoire de la critique dramatique en France, 315).
9. "Le Théâtre-Libre peut, en mai 1890, présenter au public parisien ces Revenants d'Ibsen qui sont interdits dans toute l'Europe." (Ibid.)

THE THEATRES

"Tout théâtre a son public spécial"

- Henriet.

A perfectly specific meaning is conveyed to anyone interested in the theatre by phrases like "style Châtelet", "pure Aldwych farce", "du Grand-Guignol", "typically Royal Court" or "du Théâtre-Libre". Many theatres have a character peculiarly their own.

The personality of the directeur and even the theatre's architecture may exert some influence, and geographical location has often proved an important factor in determining a theatre's proper character. Most obviously, the public is likely to be

Plus cossu, plus choisi dans les arrondissements riches, d'un degré moindre dans les petits théâtres qu'alimentent les habitants du quartier<sup>1</sup>.

but the spirit and traditions of a given quartier are sometimes as important as its economic standing. The Odéon's left-bank location seems at times to have had a definite bearing on its fortunes, as with the disastrous revival of Henriette Maréchal in 1885 and the expulsion of M. Barrault in 1968. Montrouge's Athénée-Comique, a strikingly successful enterprise in its original home near the Opéra, incontinently failed when transferred to the rue de Clichy.

However, the prime condition for acquiring a distinctive character is that a theatre should attract an adequate and relatively homogeneous public of habitués by virtue of its association with a specific dramatic style or genre. Clearly, once a rather ill-defined critical point has been reached, the process can become self-reinforcing: the



company tends to attract precisely those spectators sympathetic to its speciality.

Some Parisian theatres of this period were quite narrowly specialized, such as the Châtelet, the Grand-Guignol and the Palais-Royal; but even the more successful théâtres de genre (so-called, it has drily been said, because they had no specific genre) were also differentiated, albeit more subtly, by a characteristic public and repertoire.

## The Theatres: (1) Théâtres Subventionnés

### 1.1 The Théâtre-Français

The Comédie-Française and the Odéon were national theatres, receiving a state subsidy and subject to a certain measure of governmental control. The "official" character of these two theatres influenced in several respects the way in which they were regarded by the public.

By common consent, the Comédie-Française was held to be the acme of theatrical artistry. Indeed, this belief was so much an article of faith that a man might make himself a reputation for paradox or independent thought by questioning it.

Frédéric Henriot, whose dramatic judgement, like that of Sarcey, was the quintessence of common opinion, affirms with an assurance which brooks no denial:

De toutes les scènes parisiennes, le Théâtre-Français tient incontestablement le premier rang. Il possède un incomparable répertoire où le trésor littéraire du passé s'ajoute à un choix d'oeuvres modernes sévèrement triées. Il a une troupe d'élite recrutée aux meilleures sources, qui joue avec un merveilleux ensemble qu'on ne saurait trouver nulle part ailleurs, puisque tous les rôles, même les plus secondaires, sont tenus par des artistes capables d'emplois plus importants.<sup>2</sup>

And again, more succinctly:

La troupe qui officie dans la Maison de Molière est de valeur absolument supérieure.<sup>3</sup>

The troupe themselves were among the first to share this view, and this contributed to the chief weakness of the Comédie-Française: a tendency to become a rather complacent, conservative museum of dramatic art instead of a truly living theatre. The company certainly had style, but sometimes was a prisoner of that style. A sociétaire of a later generation, Mme Dussane, acknowledges frankly that the limitations of the Comédie-Française were apparent, for example, in the 1882 production of Becque's Les Corbeaux:

... Il arrivait aux premiers auteurs réalistes ce qui était arrivé cinquante ans plus tôt aux premiers romantiques: leur style était en avance sur celui de leurs interprètes.

Les Corbeaux furent joués consciencieusement, mais de travers et sans unité d'ensemble.<sup>4</sup>

Within a certain range, however, the Comédie-Française was indeed among the best theatres in Paris, a number of factors conducing to this state of affairs.

Henriet's mention of

une troupe d'élite recrutée aux meilleures sources

recalls the theatre's special relationship with the Conservatoire, which - in theory - enabled it to recruit the best young actors.

Nor should we overlook the government subsidy itself, the importance of which lay in the measure of independence of choice which it offered the theatre by lessening its reliance on the merely popular in drama.

Perhaps the most important thing, though, was simply the assumption that as the Théâtre-Français, the company

must represent the best that France had to offer in the drama, so that many of the best actors and playwrights, then as now, offered it their services, regarding the honour of acceptance by the Comédie-Française as the supreme consecration of their work. The belief thus tended to become self-fulfilling.

The same assumption of superiority was also made by many playgoers, particularly those not in close and up-to-date touch with Parisian theatrical activity. Such were the father taking his family for its annual visit to the play (who was, moreover, reassured by the belief that anything officially sanctioned must be respectable), the provincial and the foreigner.

Mention should be made here, in passing, of the significant influence exerted on the Parisian theatre of the late nineteenth century by the development of the French railway system.

This interesting phenomenon was remarked upon by a number of contemporary writers, including J.-J. Weiss (Le Théâtre et les mœurs, 122), F. Henriet (Monographie du spectateur au théâtre, 84), and Sarcey, who referred in Le Temps of April 14th 1874 to:

Les chemins de fer enfin terminés qui ont versé sur l'asphalte du boulevard des multitudes internationales, avides de spectacles.<sup>5</sup>

Henriet offers a personal estimate of the broad patterns of distribution of this new section of the public:

L'Opéra-Comique complète sa salle avec un fort appoint de provinciaux. The Théâtre-Français en prend aussi sa part. L'Opéra attire les étrangers. Les rastaquouères montrent volontiers leur plastron triomphant, leurs moustaches plus noires que nature et leurs pattes de lapin irresistibles aux

Variétés, ou au Palais-Royal qui recrute aussi, à cause de sa proximité, quelques spectateurs de rencontre parmi les marchands venus à Paris, pour les achats de la saison, et descendus rue du Bouloi.<sup>6</sup>

The holiday mood of most of these visitors made them a rather special public, as Maurice Descotes points out:

... L'on sait aussi que le provincial ou l'étranger qui se rend à Paris n'apporte guère, à sa visite de soucis hautement intellectuels.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the managements of certain theatres, including the Comédie-Française, could now reckon with substantial numbers of out-of-town playgoers for whom a play was, as it were, an article de Paris and an indispensable highlight of their trip to the Ville-Lumière.

Between 1870 and 1900, over 120 new light works - comedies, vaudevilles, à-propos and the like - were created at the Comédie-Française, in addition to the numerous revivals of comic pieces, classical and modern, already in its repertoire.

During these thirty years, the theatre was in the hands of two very able administrators: Emile Perrin, until his death in 1885; and then Jules Claretie, who was to remain in office for twenty-eight years.

Perrin was firm and decisive in his dealings, but effective and not without imagination or vision. Under his leadership, the Comédie-Française was relatively accessible to contemporary dramatists; indeed, his critics complained that he favoured new plays at the expense of the repertoire. His Sunday matinees made the theatre more readily available to playgoers who worked for their living, and he inaugurated the highly successful abonnement system, still in operation. Despite his trenchancy, he won the respect of his troupe,

who paid him the greatest honour in their gift by voting him une part entière.

Claretie was of an entirely different complexion: a militant republican, whose political connections sometimes stood him in good stead; a highly experienced journalist; and quite a competent playwright. He appears to have aroused the exasperation or scorn of most of the theatre people with whom he came into contact (witness Feydeau's valedictory comment

Il a emporté tous mes regrets; il ne m'en reste plus.

His fundamental indecisiveness, imperfectly concealed by sudden outbursts of bullying, earned him the derisive nickname Guimauve-le-Conquérant. Yet this elusive and irritating man successfully guided the fortunes of the Comédie-Française from 1885 to 1913, despite crises like the Thermidor scandal of 1891 and the disastrous fire of March 8th 1900.

As we have seen, both Perrin and Claretie served the cause of comedy pretty well. Under both managements, comedy at the Théâtre-Français tended to be a rather genteel, sedate affair. Although the theatre produced some supposedly scandalous comédies de mœurs during this period, including works by Dumas fils and Becque, and, at the other extreme, some genuinely carefree entertainments by Meilhac, Labiche and Bisson, its characteristic purveyors of comedy were playwrights like Coppée, Feuillet, Banville and Pailleron.

### 1.ii The Odéon

L'Odéon est, en France, le théâtre qui a toujours eu le plus de mal à vivre,<sup>8</sup>

wrote its directeur, Jean-Pierre Miquel, in 1977, and a previous tenant of Joseph Peyre and Charles de Wailly's

handsome playhouse, Jean-Louis Barrault, concurs:

Le moins que l'on puisse dire est que ce 'temple du théâtre' aura connu en cent quatre-vingt ans des 'fortunes diverses'.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the tenacious survival of the Second Théâtre-Français through all its avatars - as Odeum, Théâtre de l'Impératrice, Théâtre-Royal, Théâtre Impérial, Odéon, Salle Luxembourg and Théâtre de France - it seems that there has always been a "question de l'Odéon", since its establishment as a distinct institution under Pierre Poupart-Dorfeuille in 1795.

The crux of the matter has been the failure to decide, once and for all, on the theatre's precise role. What should its function be, as Second Théâtre Français? To provide a reserve pool of actors for the Comédie-Française? To present a repertoire by second-order playwrights to complement its classics? To provide a genuinely alternative national theatre, competing directly with the Comédie-Française on its own ground? To serve as a kind of purgatory for new authors awaiting assumption to the Maison de Molière?

The absence of a well-defined function for the theatre, subverting all attempts to pursue a coherent management policy, has surely been a cause of the theatre's remarkable instability. One expression of this has been the Odéon's notorious financial precariousness:

Peu de théâtres collectionnent autant de faillites.<sup>10</sup>

Associated with this has been the dismaying turn-over of directeurs:

En bien moins de deux siècles, il y a eu près de quarante directeurs, dont la plupart ont échoué, et toutes sortes de formules diverses.<sup>11</sup>

The three decades of the Odéon's history which are our

concern here were a period of relative stability, in fact, but nevertheless witnessed the successive administrations of Chilly, Duquesnel, La Rounat (second directorate), Porel, Marck and Desbeaux, Ginisty and Antoine (first directorate) and Ginisty alone.

Because of its official status, the Second Théâtre-Français shared something of the Comédie-Française's special appeal for the casual playgoer, mentioned earlier, and also something of its self-conscious solemnity, but under most of these directeurs comic theatre was quite well served.

It is hard to characterize Chilly's reign, as the theatre was closed during the two sieges, and in 1872 he handed over to Duquesnel.

Emile Zola, whose antipathy for Duquesnel was unconcealed, accused him of a narrowly commercial caution in his choice of repertoire, in defiance of the terms of reference of his appointment:

Jamais on ne parviendra à prouver à M. Duquesnel qu'il est absolument dans son tort en battant monnaie avec La Vie de Bohème, ou La Jeunesse de Louis XIV, ou Les Danitcheff, pendant tout un hiver, lorsque son cahier de charges lui impose l'obligation de jouer le répertoire classique et de tendre une main secourable aux jeunes auteurs de bonne volonté. (...) M. Duquesnel, qui est un homme pratique, a trouvé un expédient. Il reçoit parfois un petit acte, seulement il ne la joue jamais.

The reproach is not completely unfounded, perhaps. As far as new comedy is concerned, we note the recurrence of the same safe names: Paul Ferrier, François Coppée and, frequently, Ernest d'Hervilly, who continued to be a pillar of the establishment throughout La Rounat's second directorate also.

Porel, a remarkable and complex figure,

mariait adroitement les spectacles à grand public, les reprises aux recettes assurées (...) et les oeuvres que nous appellerions d'avant-garde.<sup>13</sup>

He was equally capable of exploiting the success of Porto-Riche's Amoureuse for all it was worth, and of taking a risk with Grand'mère by Georges Ancey, associated in all minds with the Théâtre-Libre and réalisme rosse. The experiment was a disaster, incidentally, and the play closed after three nights. On balance, the Odéon was probably much the poorer when Porel left in March 1892 to manage the palatial and ill-starred Grand-Théâtre.

In the history of the Odéon, the brief administration of Marck and Desbeaux appears a gloomy chapter, yet viewed in our narrower perspective, they seem to have served comedy relatively well. Along with lesser lights, such as Félix Cohen, Lucien Gleize and Maurice Vaucaire, we find names like Renard, Lavedan, and even Feydeau on the programme.

In this last decade of the century, there are perhaps indications of a slight thaw in the habitual primness of the Odéon's comic repertoire, as if, infected by the rather hectic gaiety of the fin-de-siècle, it had relaxed some of its gravity as Second Théâtre-Français to welcome authors more often at home at the Palais-Royal, Nouveautés or Variétés.

### 1.iii The Bodinière

The Théâtre d'Application was created with the specific object of providing a theatre in which Conservatoire pupils could gain practical stage experience in twice-weekly public performances produced by their teachers. The prime mover of the proposal and the man appointed as the theatre's first directeur was the secretary to the Comédie-Française,



Bodinier, whence the name by which the theatre was generally known: La Bodinière. Installed in the former Salle Ventadour in the rue Saint-Lazare, it was an attractive playhouse - an élégante bonbonnière, according to René Peter - with its vestibules and corridors decorated with paintings by Chéret and Renoir.

It opened in January 1888, and at first staged items from the classical repertory; but in order to attract audiences Bodinier began to vary these with lectures, pantomimes and original short plays; and from around 1890, its performances enjoyed a certain popularity with the general public. The playhouse was also extensively used by theatrical groups without a theatre of their own. One way or another, therefore, a fair number of one-act comedies, saynètes and revues were created on its stage before the Bodinière closed in 1902.<sup>14</sup>

#### The Theatres: (2) Commercial Theatres

The AMBIGU-COMIQUE was an ancient foundation and had had its moments of triumph, but it is of less importance in this context because, despite its name, it was traditionally a melodrama theatre. A few comic works of interest were played there notably Courteline's Les Gaités de l'escadron in February 1895, but the mainstay of the theatre during this period was a succession of popular dramas by Pierre Decourcelle, most especially Les Deux Gosses, which ran for a record-breaking 751 consecutive performances from February 1896. Despite all the efforts of successive managements, the Ambigu's fortunes declined steadily with those of the melodrama as a genre. The esteem in which it was held in the latter decades of its existence may be inferred from the

current dictum:

L'Ambigu est le premier théâtre de Paris...  
en arrivant par la gare de Lyon.

The playhouse, in the boulevard Saint-Martin, was finally demolished in 1967.

The Théâtre de l'ATHENEE-COMIQUE had had a chequered and complicated history. In fact, we can perhaps distinguish two Athénées. The first, operating from the rue Scribe and then, briefly, from the rue de Clichy under a variety of names - Athénée, Théâtre Lyrique, Théâtre Scribe and Athénée-Comique - lasted from 1866 to 1883, and was in turn concert hall, operetta theatre and legitimate theatre.

Noël Martin's Théâtre Scribe, which opened in 1874 to present comedies, vaudevilles and dramas, had to close only seven months later. It was succeeded, in February 1876, by the Athénée-Comique, under the management of Montrouge.

Son idée était d'implanter près de l'Opéra  
le style de spectacle qui lui avait réussi  
aux Champs-Élysées: les comédies gaies et  
les pièces à femmes... 15

This formula worked very successfully until May 1883, when, faced with an exorbitant rise in the cost of his lease, Montrouge had to move to 90, rue de Clichy. There, the transplanted theatre expired in a matter of weeks. So ended the "first" Athénée.

In 1894, Victor Koning opened a new theatre, the Comédie-Parisienne, in the rue Boudreau; and in 1896 the name was changed to Athénée-Comique. At first, the venture was persistently dogged by failure. In the closing years of the century, a ruined Koning was succeeded by Lerville, Berton, Charlot and Burguet, who hardly fared better, and then finally, in 1899, by Abel Deval, under whom the theatre

entered at last upon a brilliant period of successes.

Montrouge's Athénée-Comique was a fairly fecund source of new comedies and vaudevilles. Typical and frequent suppliers were Hippolyte Raymond and Paul Burani, although, at the end of its career, the theatre was to welcome Georges Feydeau, at the beginning of his.

The "second" Athénée-Comique offered a wider repertoire, and hence a smaller proportion of comic drama, until Deval's management at the turn of the century.

Théâtre BEAUMARCHAIS was the name given, from October 1842, to the former Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Antoine, founded in 1835 at number 25, boulevard Beaumarchais. Its repertoire was specialized only to the extent of favouring the more popular genres - drame, opéra-bouffe, operetta and vaudeville - but at one time or another the Beaumarchais staged everything from revue to ballet. For the most part, it presented insignificant plays, written by nonentities such as Mirrèle or Boucherat (or worse), and served by perfectly undistinguished troupes. It was, in fact, an even humbler establishment than the Cluny or the Déjazet. Yet somehow, under a succession of nondescript managements, it eked out a precarious existence for half a century, until its demolition in late 1892.

The BOUFFES-PARISIENS of this era was the second theatre of the name, opened by Offenbach on 29 December 1855 at Comte's old Théâtre des Jeunes-Elèves in the passage Choiseul. Closed during the war and the Commune, it reopened on 16 September 1871 under its pre-war management of Charles Comte and Jules Noriac, and resumed its previous repertory of operettas and opéras-bouffes. Indeed, during the period

in question, apart from the occasional vaudeville it was to remain predominantly a lyric theatre, birth-place of Les Mousquetaires au couvent and La Mascotte.

The smart little Théâtre des CAPUCINES was one of the most notable of the crop of chic, expressly "Parisian" theatres which were a special feature of the Nineties. Situated in the boulevard des Capucines, it opened under Adolphe Franck's management on 20 May 1898, with a bill which included works by Alphonse Allais and Tristan Bernard and Becque. Its programmes, frequently changed, were usually spectacles coupés composed of sophisticated comedies by such playwrights as Jeanne Marni, Tristan Bernard and Francis de Croisset.

When the CHATEAU D'EAU went back into production after the Commune,<sup>16</sup> it returned to its characteristic repertory of féeries and dramas, interspersed with the occasional vaudeville and its revues de fin d'année, its sole interest for this enquiry. In fact, one might characterize the theatre as a poorer, less lavish Châtelet.

The CHATELET was a very specialized institution. Equipped with one of the largest stages in Europe, its province was the spectacular: dramas and féeries à grand spectacle, with numerous tableaux and a prodigal use of stage machinery and special effects. From the point of view of comic drama, however, this remarkable theatre is of minor importance.

The situation of the CLUNY is exactly the contrary. Although of interest here, by virtue of the surprising number of new comic pieces staged there, the Cluny occupied a distinctly third-rate status in the theatrical life of the

capital. The tiny theatre, founded by Larochelle, was most often impoverished and struggling during the years with which we are concerned, and endowed with a troupe which was, in Jacques Lorcey's mild words:

L'une des plus discutables de la capitale sur le plan de la qualité. 17

Yet this somewhat shabby enterprize staged a steady succession of comedies and vaudevilles by the sort of playwright whose works, artistically mediocre but numerically impressive, gave the French comic stage of this era its special density: Victor Bernard, Bertol-Graivil, Bisson, Carré, Gandillot, Ginisty, Leterrier, Oswald, Raymond, Vanloo... even Rostand and Zola.

Victor Koning's COMEDIE-PARISIENNE was one of the legendary theatrical disasters of the period, following upon the failures of the Eden-Théâtre and the Grand-Théâtre:

Koning, qui avait eu des hauts et des bas, ne connut la débacle définitive qu'en ouvrant, dans un coin du bâtiment de l'Eden-Théâtre, une coquette petite salle appelée la Comédie-Parisienne. 18

Koning's star was his second wife, Raphaële Sisos, and he had a troupe of competent players who had appeared at the Gymnase, Palais-royal or Vaudeville. However, the theatre's besetting weakness was that it had no real niche of its own. This was apparent from the first performance, on 30 December 1893. Jacques Redelsperger's prologue d'ouverture suggested the theatre's aim was to bring truly Parisian drama back to Paris; but while the curtain-raiser, Meilhac's Suzanne et les deux vieillards, and the main item, Meilhac and Halévy's La Veuve, were certainly "Parisian" enough, they were both revivals.

Tout est neuf - sauf le spectacle,

wrote L. François in the Revue d'Art Dramatique. The theatre closed on 14 March 1894, and in a matter of months, Koning died in a sanatorium.

The Théâtre DEJAZET was an enterprize very similar to the Cluny. It had come into being in 1859, when the celebrated actress Virginie Déjazet took over the former Folies-Nouvelles, established by the versatile Hervé in the boulevard du Temple, and installed her son Eugène as manager. In the event, he managed so poorly that although Sardou had his first success there, the theatre had to be sold in 1869. The name Déjazet was retained, however.

The theatre reopened after the Commune, but functioned only fitfully until 1876, when it was acquired by Ballande to house his so-called Troisième Théâtre-Français. This was not a success, and when Ballande moved on in 1880, the theatre reverted to its former name, and took to specializing in vaudevilles.

The DELASSEMENTS-COMIQUES was a very modest comic theatre. There had been a theatre of that name in the old boulevard du Temple before its demolition, which had then moved to the rue de Provence. The "Délass-Com'" was never an important theatre, but in the Sixties and Seventies its stage saw some entirely undistinguished players serving a fair number of mediocre operettas, revues and vaudevilles by nonentities such as Seurat and Vazeilles.

The EDEN-THEATRE was an immensely expensive theatre built by Francis de Plunkett and opened in 1883. Its spectacles were lavish but failed to find a public. The most interesting chapter in the theatre's history was in the spring of 1887, when Lamoureux took it over and gave the

Paris premiere of Lohengrin, despite anti-German demonstrations and threats to his personal safety. In 1888, one of Plunkett's former partners, Eugène Bertrand, tried again but could not make it pay. Finally, it was acquired by Porel in 1892 for his Grand-Théâtre.

The FOLIES-DRAMATIQUES is of some interest here because vaudevilles were a significant part of its stock in trade, and also because a number of fine actors - among them Calvin, Guy and Augustine Leriche - passed across its stage early in their careers, as Judith had done before them. Nevertheless, the theatre in the rue de Bondy was predominantly a lyric one. Composers such as Hervé, Lacôme, Litolff, Offenbach and Planquette graced its play-bills with operettas like Les Cloches de Corneville and La Fille du Tambour-major, while its vaudevillistes were generally pretty small beer.

The GAITE was a large, shabby theatre traditionally devoted to dramas until it was taken over and lavishly refurbished by Offenbach in 1873. The regulations of the Société des Auteurs forbade his producing his own works there; but after a series of failures with straight plays, culminating in the costly collapse of Sardou's La Haine in December 1874, he had every excuse to mount a "stop-gap" revival of Orphée aux enfers, suavely preparing the way for the Gaité's conversion to a lyric theatre, which had doubtless been his intention from the beginning.

The GRAND-GUIGNOL, in the rue Chaptal, was a tiny theatre seating less than 250 spectators.<sup>19</sup> Its aptly Gothic atmosphere was created by carved woodwork, a raftered roof and ogival windows, the playhouse having been installed

in painter Georges Rochegrosse's studio  
(formerly a Jansenist convent).<sup>20</sup>

It was opened by Oscar Méténier on 13 April 1897.<sup>21</sup>

Juan Ignacio Murcia has suggested that the theatre specialized from the outset in the sensational horror drama to which it was to give its name:

Afin de se créer un public plus vaste, celui-ci commence à organiser les spectacles du genre qui prendra le nom de 'grandguignolesque'.<sup>22</sup>

Daniel Gerould, however, maintained that

Although the Grand Guignol would soon become world-famous as a horror theatre, during the two years of Méténier's management it was a direct offshoot of the Théâtre-Libre and attracted many of Antoine's authors.<sup>23</sup>

Analysis of the theatre's programmes suggests that Gerould was right, and the theatre's association with horror plays was chiefly established under Max Maurey's management, which lasted until 1914.

Programmes at the Grand-Guignol had a distinctive format. They were spectacles coupés composed of perhaps half a dozen very short pieces, of only some twenty minutes each, in which realistic pieces or the special brand of harrowing melodrama alternated with farces. The inaugural programme, for instance, included sketches by Courteline as well as comédies rosses by Méténier himself.

The company also had a characteristic, full-blooded style. Just as the maximum of shock and terror was wrung out of the serious dramas, the farces were played for all they were worth. It seems no mere chance that the chaotic frenzy of Courteline's Les Boulingrin was created here in 1898. Surely, few other troupes of the time could have mustered the headlong speed, emphasis and brio required.

When Porel left the Odéon in 1892 to found the GRAND-



THEATRE in what had been the Eden-Théâtre, he took with him not just his wife, Réjane, but many of the Odéon's best actors. The venture opened on 12 November 1892, but despite the quality of the direction and acting and a programme which ranged from Racine and Molière to Daudet and Loti, from the lyric drama Merowig to Donnay's Lysistrata, the Grand-Théâtre was forced to close on 30 March 1893.

The only commercial theatre which the critics and commentators of this period mention in the same breath as the Théâtre-Français and the Odéon is the GYMNASÉ. It had something of the same respectable, conservative, rather stodgy air, which bourgeois audiences found so reassuring and artistic.

When the Third Republic came into being, the Gymnase had had half a century of success, largely the achievement of its two outstanding managers, Poirson and his successor Montigny, whose reign was to continue until his death in 1880. They had excelled in recognizing playwrights whose work was exactly suited to the Gymnase's habitual bourgeois public. It seems like a portent that the theatre had opened, on 23 October 1820, to a prologue d'ouverture by Scribe, whom Poirson had wooed away from the Vaudeville to become for years virtually the poète à gages of the Gymnase. Other popular playwrights whose works were later secured for the theatre included Sardou, Scribe's natural successor, Dumas fils, and Meilhac and Halévy. By the latter years of the Second Empire, the Gymnase's takings far exceeded those of the Théâtre-Français and of the Odéon. In Le Théâtre contemporain for 16 May 1866, Barbey d'Aurevilly commented

Le théâtre du Gymnase est présentement, de fait le premier Théâtre-Français.

Nor was the success achieved by Poirson and by Montigny only a commercial one. During their managements an excellent troupe was formed, which included Bressant, Geoffroy, Lafontaine, Céline Chaumont, Jenny Colon, Déjazet, Aimée Desclée, Blanche Pierson and the young Sarah Bernhardt.

It cannot fairly be said, either, that Montigny at least was entirely unadventurous in his choice of repertoire. Certain of Dumas fils' plays presented at the Gymnase profoundly scandalized its public, and it was the Gymnase which staged Becque's La Navette in November 1878, and Les Honnêtes femmes in January 1880.

Montigny himself was probably the best French metteur en scène of his time, and under his direction the style of production at the Gymnase evolved from the conventional, vaudevillesque staging of the Scribe era towards a kind of qualified realism. Nevertheless, the staple of the theatre's repertory during this period remained "well-made" plays by well-known authors, generally expressing conventional attitudes and values acceptable to a predominantly bourgeois public.

Montigny's Gymnase had a relatively important output of comedies and vaudevilles within these specifications, supplied by established entertainers like Achard, Ferrier, Grangé, Meilhac, Pailleron and Raymond.

Under Victor Koning's administration (1881-1893), the theatre lost some of its importance to comic drama:

Avec lui le répertoire va s'orienter vers un théâtre de mœurs plus violent, avec des mélodrames bourgeois,<sup>24</sup>

but in the closing years of the century, the Gymnase regained some of its former importance as a comic stage presenting

playwrights as diverse as Brieux and Capus, Lemaître and Courteline.

The frequency with which the MARIGNY changed its name in its first half-century of intermittent existence seems an apt symbol of a persistent uncertainty about the theatre's identity and function. The first premises, in the allée des Veuves, were built in about 1850 by a showman named Lacaze. The tiny, cramped, ramshackle wooden structure was taken over in 1855 by Offenbach, who transformed it into the original Bouffes-Parisiens. After the Bouffes moved on to the passage Choiseul, the mime Deburau performed there for three seasons; and the name-changing went on: Théâtre Féérique, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Folies-Marigny, Panorama-Marigny, Marigny-Théâtre, Comédie-Marigny...

Closed in July 1870, the theatre reopened in September 1871 as a purveyor of vaudevilles interspersed with operettas, written by practitioners of moderate means: Blondeau, Blum, Hermil, Ordonneau, Savard and the like. Falling into a long and profound decline in the Eighties, the establishment was rebuilt in 1894, but thereafter was nothing more than a revue theatre of very little interest.<sup>25</sup>

During its short existence (1865-1890) the Théâtre des MENUS-PLAISIRS, too, never really settled on a style, a genre, a public or even a name, at various times calling itself Théâtre des Arts, Opéra-Bouffe and Comédie-Parisienne (not to be confused with Koning's calamity of 1894), before acquiring yet another title, much more glorious in the annals of the theatre.

Throughout these metamorphoses, the theatre maintained a generally light repertoire - comedies, vaudevilles, revues,

féeries, operettas and opéras-comiques - often the work of middle-range vaudevillistes like Victor Bernard, Bisson or Valabrègue. On the whole, the Menus-Plaisirs of the period 1870-1890 seems something like a lesser, unlucky Variétés that never found its Meilhac and Halévy.

In 1890, the theatre became the permanent home of the Théâtre-Libre, and in 1897 that of the Théâtre-Antoine; but those enterprizes were so utterly different in style and intention that they will be considered as separate theatres elsewhere.

The THEATRE-MONDAIN, in the Cité d'Antin, opened on 29 March 1898. As its name suggests, it was elegantly appointed and specialized in a sophisticated, "Parisian" repertory which included comedies, revues and opéras-comiques. Besides the dramatic efforts of society ladies and gentlemen, the theatre staged light pieces by such as Lavedan and Xanrof.

The Théâtre des NATIONS in the place du Châtelet had originally been built by the municipality to replace the Théâtre-Lyrique, a casualty of 1871. Designed by Davioud, it opened its doors in 1874. In the mid-Seventies, it was known as the Théâtre Historique and specialized in dramas. Henry James described it to readers of the New York Tribune as

Very far off, and, though of splendid aspect and proportion, much frequented by that class of amateurs who find the suspense of the entr'actes intolerable without the beguilement of an orange. (1 April 1876)

In 1879, the critic Gustave Bertrand acquired it, changed its name to Théâtre des Nations and ran it largely for the benefit of the actress Marie Dumas. He was on the

verge of bankruptcy when he died, rather abruptly, on 8 February 1880. Ballande then took it over until 1885, staging productions which were a byword in Paris for their tawdriness.

The Opéra-Comique moved into the theatre in 1887, after the disastrous fire at the Salle Favart, and stayed until June 1898. Monza hired it for a short season of dramas in late 1898, then it passed, on 21 January 1899 to Sarah Bernhardt, who gave it her name.

The NOUVEAUTES of this period was the new theatre of that name built in the Boulevard des Italiens by the celebrated actor Brasseur. For twelve years he kept his off-spring in very sound financial health on a mixed, light diet of vaudevilles, operettas and revues. After him, the theatre fell into something of a decline, and by 1892 it was on the very brink of collapse when providentially saved by the staggering success of Champignol malgré lui.

For the connoisseur of French comedy, the Nouveautés is above all Feydeau's theatre, where some of his greatest successes - Champignol, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, La Dame de chez Maxim, Occupe-toi d'Amélie, On purge Bébé - were created by a brilliant troupe headed by Germain, Marcel Simon and of course Cassive. Since its early days under Brasseur, the Nouveautés had been a significant comic theatre; in the Nineties, with such actors serving authors like Feydeau and Capus, it became one of Paris' greatest.

The greatest of all, however, the comic theatre par excellence, was indisputably the PALAIS-ROYAL. The list of productions given in Eugène Hugot's Histoire littéraire, critique et anecdotique du Théâtre du Palais-Royal, albeit

very incomplete, is a very roll-call of the leading comic specialists of the day: Labiche and Duru, Gondinet, Barrière, Meilhac and Halévy, Clairville and Busnach, Grangé and Bernard, Sardou, Delacour and Hennequin, Meilhac and Gille... and Feydeau, of course.

The Palais-Royal was unswervingly dedicated to laughter. One is astonished at the priggish ineptitude of Jules Janin's comment:

Hors du rire et de la bêtise, il n'y a point de salut pour le Théâtre du Palais-Royal.

Le rire and la bêtise were the Palais-Royal's proper sphere; and the theatre displayed a rare degree of perfection in achieving its chosen objectives. Zola, less blinded by intellectual snobbery, saw more clearly:

Les farces du Palais-Royal sont, en somme, de beaucoup supérieures le plus souvent aux comédies jouées sur des scènes réputées sérieuses. C'est là que MM. Meilhac et Halévy ont donné le meilleur de leur esprit; c'est là encore que M. Gondinet et M. Labiche ont touché de bien près à la haute comédie, tout en restant dans le rire à outrance. <sup>26</sup>

The gaiety of the repertoire did not preclude a rigorous insistence on high dramatic standards. The habitués of the Palais-Royal, while they demanded laughter, were by no means easy-going hypergelasts, as Meredith would say. On the contrary, all testimonies are agreed that they were a very exacting public:

De tout temps, le Palais-Royal fut un théâtre où il était très difficile de réussir comme auteur et comme acteur, car le public n'y allait pas seulement pour se distraire ou pour s'amuser, mais pour y rire à ventre déboutonné. Et il en voulait pour son argent! <sup>27</sup>

Hugot's fairly candid account supports this view, recording a number of resounding failures, and it is clear that the theatre's finicky audiences were no respecters of

persons, rejecting even those playwrights who had most delighted them when the offering was not up to standard, including Labiche and Augier, Meilhac and Halévy, Meilhac and Gille, Gondinet, Leterrier and Vanloo, Pierre Decourcelle and other former favourites.

That the Palais-Royal was able to make large sums of money from so fastidious a public was due, as Zola rightly believed, partly to able managements (Dormeuil, Francis de Plunkett and Choler, etc), but mostly to its incredible troupe, within its own specialized range at least equal in excellence to the Comédiens-Français. This company had achieved its unrivalled standard of comedy playing under the Second Empire, notably serving the works of Labiche in his prime. Now, remarkably, it was able to maintain that standard by intelligent recruitment (Montbars, Alice Regnault, Fusier, Alice Lavigne, Galipaux, Réjane, etc). It is quite clear from contemporary testimony, such as Galipaux' Souvenirs, that these hilarious comedians were often insufferable individuals in private life, but on stage they formed an incomparable comic ensemble.

Zola, who admired their skill unreservedly, thought that they were, if anything, superior to the material they played:

Il est fâcheux que l'excellente troupe du Palais-Royal soit employée trop souvent à jouer de grosses farces, lorsqu'elle se montre parfaite dans des genres plus littéraires. 28

The public of the Palais-Royal were not at all averse to more literary pieces as such: genre distinctions meant little, provided the play was genuinely funny. If this sine qua non was satisfied they would give an enthusiastic reception to vaudeville and high comedy alike, and this

period offers examples of some outstanding successes:

Doit-on le dire?, La Boule, Divorçons, Monsieur chasse and the like.

Like the Ambigu-Comique (with which, indeed, it had much else in common), the PORTE-SAINT-MARTIN, although a theatre of great interest and importance in itself, is of lesser significance from the point of view of comic drama, since it was traditionally a melodrama theatre, the scene of many of Lemaître's greatest triumphs.

The Porte-Saint-Martin of which we speak was a new playhouse, the old one having been destroyed by fire on May 25th 1871, during the fighting between the Commune and Versailles. The 1800-seat theatre which opened in 1873 was managed by Larochelle and Ritt, and when they also took over the Ambigu-Comique in 1877, they pooled the companies of the two theatres. In general, they continued the theatre's traditional repertoire, and Paul Clèves, who succeeded them in 1879, offered a programme largely reliant on revivals of popular dramas and féeries.

An interesting chapter in the theatre's history opened in 1883, when Sarah Bernhardt took it over, placing her teenage son Maurice in nominal charge, aided and overseen by Durembourg. She starred in several productions of this management, which were mostly revivals of well-tried favourites like Froufrou, La Dame aux camélias and La Tour de Nesle.

The Bernhardt-Durembourg administration was not greatly successful, nevertheless, and the experienced Duquesnel took over. Under his management, the theatre continued to present mainly dramas and féeries, many of them revivals, but inter-



spersed with new works by popular playwrights like Sardou and Ohnet.

In January and February 1891, the Porte-Saint-Martin offered its hospitality to Antoine's still-itinerant Théâtre-Libre. The short season, of about twenty performances, was an interesting experiment but no great financial success.

Henriet suggests:

La scène était trop vaste pour ces drames un peu minces de la vie domestique; trop vaste aussi la salle pour le public spécial que cette expérience pouvait intéresser. 29

Duquesnel's successor, Emile Rochard, remodelled the playhouse and tried unavailingly to tempt the public with a succession of patriotic dramas, but in 1895 had to yield to Baduel, who was, in fact, a man of straw for the great actor Constant Coquelin. The theatre's fortunes began to mend once more, thanks largely to a good company, headed by Coquelin himself, of course, but also including Taillade and the lovely young Jane Hading.

In June 1897, Coquelin took over the management of the theatre personally, in association with his equally-famous brother. In December, he had perhaps the greatest moment of his acting career in the unparalleled - and unexpected - triumph of Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac, which ran throughout 1898 for 307 consecutive performances, and was revived for the Exhibition year 1900. If for no other reason, the Porte-Saint-Martin deserves a place here on account of Cyrano.

The Théâtre de la RENAISSANCE, the third venture of that name, was opened in March 1873 by Hippolyte Hostein. After a faltering start, which included Zola's unsuccessful Thérèse Raquin, the theatre found success by devoting itself

to operetta, opéra-comique and opéra-bouffe. Jeanne Granier, who began her career as a singer, was among the troupe at this time.

Fernand Samuel, succeeding Hostein, offered a more eclectic, indeed quite imaginative programme, still including some lyric works, but interspersed with comedies by Bisson and the like. To him, too, goes the credit for staging Becque's La Parisienne, refused by the Théâtre-Français and the Vaudeville.

After Samuel, the inescapable Victor Koning was directeur for a time, as was Courteline's unlikely literary hero Catulle Mendès. During this period, a fair proportion of comedy continued to be played at the Renaissance, including early works by Feydeau and Desvallières.

In 1893, Sarah Bernhardt took over the theatre, and during the five years of her occupancy, a very varied repertoire was performed: the French classics, successful modern playwrights like Curel, Lemaître and Rostand, of course, and a number of foreign dramatists. Viewed as a consumer of comic drama, therefore, the Renaissance was a theatre of moderate importance during the years 1870-1900, with something of a swing from fairly broad comedy towards work of more literary pretensions - Rostand, Lemaître, Curel, Donnay, Guiches - after 1893.

The Théâtre TAITBOUT, installed in a former concert-hall, eked out a meagre existence from early 1875 to the spring of 1878. At first it leaned towards light opera, but widened its scope to include comedies, vaudevilles, parodies and an annual revue de fin d'année. Perhaps the most interesting of its lack-lustre playwrights was Courteline's

father, Jules Moinaux.

The Théâtre de la TOUR D'AUVERGNE was the former Théâtre des Jeunes-Artistes, a sort of forerunner of the Bodinière. After the Commune, under Charles Bridault's management, the theatre turned from spectacles classiques to a more modern repertoire, including vaudevilles and revues and was thereafter a fairly significant outlet for minor comic playwrights.

The TOUR EIFFEL was a tiny, pleasant, seasonal theatre established on the first platform of the tower in 1892 by Bodinier. Its most notable productions were the popular revues which Cailhavet wrote at the beginning of his career, in collaboration with Franck.

The VARIETES of this epoch was the fourth Parisian theatre of that name, built in 1807 in the boulevard Montmartre by the actor Mira-Brunet. In the Thirties, under the Armand Dartois administration, Lemaître had performed there, but by 1870, the Variétés was a leading comedy theatre to which Lemonnier, Meilhac and Halévy, Labiche, Lambert-Thiboust and Barrière had lent their lustre during the Sixties with a stream of successful comedies, vaudevilles and revues. After the war, the theatre reopened with the same fare: revivals of some of Offenbach's popular successes, comedies by Meilhac and Halévy, Labiche and Gille, vaudevilles by Bocage and Victor Bernard, and revues by Leterrier and Vanloo, Blum and Toché, Siraudin, Blondeau and Monréal.

The Variétés entered a period of success almost comparable to its heyday of the Second Empire when Fernand Samuel took over the management in 1892. Under his direction the theatre presented works by Bisson, Ferrier, Gavault,

Maurice Hennequin, Lavedan and Valabrègue, among others.

These works were served by a really excellent troupe. Like its great rival, the Palais-Royal, the Variétés seems to have had the happy gift of retaining its splendid constellation of great comic actors. With occasional appearances en représentation, Baron played there for nearly forty years; Guy was "Guy des Variétés" to his contemporaries from the Nineties until his death in 1917; Albert Brasseur, after working under his father at the Nouveautés, joined the troupe in 1890 and was to stay for twenty-four years; and the young Prince, recruited by Samuel in 1898, was to remain for fourteen.

The actresses, though somewhat more transient, were of equal quality and were collectively renowned for their beauty and charm. They included the vivacious Anna Judic, the sprightly Amélie Dieterle,<sup>30</sup> the piquante Céline Chaumont, the entrancing Eve Lavallière and the peerless Réjane.

All in all, then, the Variétés of this period must be recognized as being on a par with the Vaudeville and second only to the Palais-Royal among the comic theatres of the capital.

The original Théâtre du VAUDEVILLE, which opened its doors in the rue de Chartres in January 1791, had been exactly what its name implied. The second Vaudeville, founded in the rue Vivienne in 1840, evolved rather towards comedy proper, and even comédie dramatique. This theatre won for itself a rather special place in the theatrical life of Paris. According to Zola:

On le regardait comme la scène où l'on pouvait tout hasarder. Quand un auteur avait écrit un drame ou une comédie qui devait, selon lui, brutaliser le public, il le portait au Vaudeville. 31

La Dame aux camélias offers a perfect instance of this aspect of the second Vaudeville. Its successor was distinctly more staid and conventional.

Built by Baron Haussmann to designs by Magne, the third Vaudeville stood on the corner of the boulevard des Capucines and the Chaussée d'Antin from April 1869 until 1927, when it became - sign of the times - the Paramount cinema. The enterprise made a very shaky start under the administrations of Hermant and Carvalho, but things improved under the Deslandes/Roger/Bertrand management. Barrière, Abraham Dreyfus, Ferrier and Gondinet were typical of the playwrights writing for the Vaudeville's public at this time.

The theatre's popularity and prosperity improved still further after Albert Carré took it over in 1883. The older, established comic playwrights, such as Bisson, Sardou, Ferrier, and Lemaître, continued to supply the Vaudeville, but Carré also recognized the promise of younger dramatists: Curel, Gandillot, Guinon, Hervieu, Lavedan and Porto-Riche.

The real golden age of the Vaudeville dawned in 1893, however, when Carré went into partnership with Porel after the Grand-Théâtre debacle. Réjane followed her husband, and for ten years became the theatre's brightest star, with partners such as Jeanne Granier, Jane Hading, Galipaux and Lucien Guitry. Such actors, serving Bisson, Capus, Donnay and the like secured for the Vaudeville a leading place among the comic theatres of Paris.

### The Theatres: (3) Théâtres de quartier

A mesure (...) que la population de la périphérie parisienne devient plus dense, les théâtres de quartier s'y multiplient,

wrote Frédéric Henriot in 1892.

Many of the outlying districts of Paris possessed their own local playhouse at the time of which we speak, before the cinema set up in competition and before cheap and rapid metro transport brought about a greater centralization of theatrical activity.

The theatre played its part, along with the cafés-concerts and the bals, in creating the intense vitality of such local centres of popular entertainment as the rue de la Gaîté in Montparnasse or the rue de Belleville.

Among such théâtres de quartier, we might mention the Bouffes-du-Nord, gratefully remembered by theatrical historians as the cradle of the nascent Théâtre de l'Oeuvre; the Théâtre des Batignolles (now the Hébertot) in the plaine Monceau; the Théâtre de Belleville; the Théâtre des Folies-Voltaire; the Théâtre des Gobelins; the Théâtre de Grenelle; the Théâtre Moncey, in the avenue de Clichy; the Théâtre de Montmartre (now the Atelier) in the place Dancourt; the Théâtre Montparnasse (now the Montparnasse/Gaston Baty) in the rue de la Gaîté, remembered, if for no other reason, because its directeur, Hartmann, offered its hospitable stage successively to the Théâtre-Libre in 1887 and to the Théâtre d'art in 1891-1892; and Tivoli, avenue de la Motte-Piquet.

A good proportion of these théâtres de quartier were the creation of two actors turned impresario: Pierre-Jacques Séveste, and his successor Henry Boullanger, alias "Larochelle".

Séveste conceived the idea of composing his troupe largely of débutants and even of Conservatoire pupils: his Théâtre de Montmartre was sometimes known as the Théâtre

d'Elèves. This provided useful experience for the young actors, and an inexpensive labour-force for Séveste.

He also established the principle of a mobile troupe, taking a play from one of his chain of theatres to another, often during the same evening. This cost-efficient system of exploitation, known in the profession as the "Galères-Séveste", was the basis of his success.

The Larochelle dynasty, succeeding that of the Sévestes, also made a fortune by continuing the same general strategy. New theatres, such as the Cluny and the Gobelins, were added to the circuit, and plays were rotated among them, very much after the fashion of modern cinema chains.

Although these local boui-bouis were of great social importance, and even possess some theatrical significance for anyone interested in certain popular genres, the nature of their usual repertoire renders them less relevant to the present enquiry.

The theatres of the working-class quarters, besides being fairly steady consumers of operettas and of all kinds of revivals, were among the last bastions of the melodrama. In his declining years, forgotten by the major theatres, Frédérick Lemaître took refuge at the Montparnasse, the Grenelle and the Gobelins. At the Théâtre Montparnasse, blessed with actors like Fontaine and Camille Beuve, the traditional repertoire was maintained until 1929.

On the other hand, most théâtres de quartier had a relatively small output of new comedies, vaudevilles and farces, although there were exceptions. Thus, at the Théâtre de Montmartre successive managements preserved a varied repertoire of melodramas, operettas, comedies and

vaudevilles, while at the Montparnasse there was an old-established tradition of vaudeville. When Séveste took over the theatre in 1817, and when Larochelle became directeur in 1851, both continued the unique programme structure traditional there: a marathon treble-bill consisting of a melodrama sandwiched between two full-length vaudevilles, good value for money for the patrons, for whom the curtain rose at six, and who warmed their picnic dinners on the stove in the centre of the pit.

As a class, however, the théâtres de quartier cannot be regarded as major outlets for contemporary comic drama.

#### 4. Cafés-Concerts, Music-Halls and Cabarets

Towards the end of the last century, Paris possessed numerous cafés-concerts - just how numerous they were is difficult to determine. Henry Gidel has suggested more than a hundred; Jacques-Charles put the figure at over one hundred and fifty; while Zola complained in La Cloche (5 May 1872) that

Ces trous où traînent les ordures des  
chansons comiques, les sensibleries des  
romances, sont au nombre d'environ quatre  
cents.

They differed widely in size, from the very tiny to Bataclan, with its two thousand seats; in appointments, from the traditional wooden chairs with the shelf on the back for the consommations to true theatres, resplendent in gilt and red plush, with balconies and boxes; and in style, from the most plebeian beuglant to the chic Scala and prestigious Eldorado.

L'antique romance, toujours la même depuis  
cent ans, n'y fleurit pas moins que le couplet  
scatologique ou grivois. Et l'on a, par-dessus



le marché, de la danse, de la pantomime, de  
la gymnastique, des morceaux joués par  
l'orchestre, quelquefois un vaudeville,<sup>32</sup>

wrote Jules Lemaître in 1885. It is on the strength of its vaudevilles, and also its saynètes, parodies and revues, that the caf'-conc' finds a place here.

Camille Doucet had opened the way for the spread of drama beyond the theatre proper when, as Directeur des théâtres, he had signed the Ordonnance de 1867, which permitted cafés-concerts to present dramatic performances and their artistes to wear costume instead of the evening-dress hitherto de rigueur.

In his Monographie du spectateur au théâtre (56), Henriet curtly dismissed the café-concert's contribution to comic drama:

Je laisse de côté les cafés-concerts qui  
participent plus de la tabagie que du théâtre.

However, Henriet was an arrant theatrical snob, and the facts are against him. Even the most perfunctory analysis of the listings in Wicks' Parisian Stage for the years 1870-1900 makes it clear that the café-concert's output of comic drama was significant. It was unquestionably so numerically. As to their quality, the works presented were generally rather inferior to those of the major legitimate theatres, no doubt; but it should be borne in mind that often enough they were actually the very same plays, as the cafés-concerts, like the minor theatres, relied extensively on revivals of boulevard successes. Nor was it unknown for the process to be reversed, and among those comic playwrights who wrote one or more pieces for first performance at cafés-concerts were such masters as Tristan Bernard, Courteline and Feydeau.

Further, the evidence of reviewers and other contem-

poraries suggests that the quality of the production and performance at some establishments was by no means negligible either; and the significant number of former caf'-conc' artistes who later had successful careers on the legitimate stage again argues that the absolute distinction between café-concert and theatre which Henriet implies did not exist.

Henry Gidel has shown that by far the commonest dramatic genre presented at the cafés-concerts was the vaudeville,<sup>33</sup> but they also maintained a steady output of revues, parodies and operettas. The first piece played at the Eldorado after the 1867 Ordonnance was in fact an operetta, with music by the establishment's own musical director, none other than Hervé, le compositeur toqué, one of the leading figures in the development of the genre. A decade or so later, the Eldorado turned full-time operetta theatre for a while when the competition from the Scala, founded opposite in 1878, became too keen.

The revue was a speciality of the remote Gaîté-Rochouart, a tradition begun by M. and Mme Varlet, the Montrouges of the caf'-conc', during their long and successful management (1882-1914):

Ils avaient longtemps borné leurs ambitions à présenter des tours de chant comme tous les autres caf' conc'; mais un beau jour, ils inaugurèrent la série de leurs revues qui, bien présentées, bien jouées, firent monter tout Paris à la Gaîté-Rochouart, - en fiacre! 34

Soon, other cafés-concerts (e.g. the Alcazar d'Eté, La Cigale, etc) adopted the practice of staging a revue as the second part of their programme. Others, such as the Ambassadeurs, confined themselves to a revue de fin d'année, like the legitimate theatres.

The café-concert's particular kind of public seems also

to have had a partiality to parody and, as is shown below, the café-concert's contribution to the genre was at least quantitatively important.

Although they were still numerous, however, the cafés-concerts had really passed their heyday by the end of the century, losing ground in particular to the music-hall. Indeed, a number of cafés-concerts, including the Folies-Bergère and Ambass', themselves became music-halls. These were a recent innovation in France, inspired by the English example, as the name suggests.<sup>35</sup> Which was the first Parisian music-hall is really a matter of definition. The first theatre on the Boulevards purpose-built for shows of a music-hall type was the Fantaisies-Oller, opened in 1875;<sup>36</sup> while the first establishment actually to call itself a music-hall appears to have been the Olympia, built in 1893 by the same Joseph Oller.<sup>37</sup> The music-hall was to have a long and prosperous future in France, but by their nature its shows had no contribution to make to comic drama.

However, the fin-de-siècle also saw the flowering of another offshoot of the café-concert: the artistic or literary cabarets, such as the Chat Noir, Mirliton, Quat' Z-Arts and Carillon, beginning with the first Chat Noir, founded by Rodolphe Salis in the Boulevard Rochechouart in 1881.<sup>38</sup> In varying degrees, most of these staged such forms of drama as their available space and resources might permit.

Not all cafés-concerts or cabarets staged saynètes or vaudevilles, then, but a large number did, including the Alcazar, Bataclan, Bête à Fursy, Carillon, Cigale, Divan Japonais, Eden, Eldorado, Epoque, Européen, Folies-Belleville, Fourmi, Gaîté-Montparnasse, Gaîté-Rochechouart, Parisien,

Pépinière, Scala, Ternes, Tertulia, Tréteau de Tabarin and Trianon, reserving a place apart for the Chat Noir with its mimes and ombres chinoises.

The Carillon perhaps deserves special mention because, together with the Théâtre Antoine and the Grand-Guignol, the cabaret in the rue Chaptal was one of Courteline's favourite stages. Francis Pruner has suggested that the reception encountered by Les Gaîtés de l'Escadron at the Ambigu in 1895 made Courteline chary of the large commercial theatres.<sup>39</sup> Artists such as Louise France, Tervil, and on several occasions the proprietor, Bertrand Millanvoye, created a number of Courteline's saynètes and shorter pieces at the Carillon, including La Cinquantaine, L'Extra-lucide, La Lettre chargée, Gros chagrins and La Voiture versée. Court-room fantasies like Un Client sérieux and Petin, Mouil-larbourg et consorts fitted in particularly well with the satirical Assises du Carillon, which were an established feature there.

Notwithstanding Henriët's dismissive scorn, therefore, the sheer volume of lighter pieces produced at cafés-concerts and cabarets, and the real interest of a few of those pieces, give such establishments a certain significance in the comic drama of this period.

## 5. Dramatic Societies & Cercles

The continuing theatromania of the period was perhaps reflected in the striking proliferation of amateur drama groups - cercles and sociétés dramatiques - during the last three decades of the century. It was as though the metropolitan theatres, even augmented by a growing number of théâtres de quartier, cafés-concerts and cabarets, could not

suffice to satisfy the public's craving for theatrical entertainment. It seems reasonable to propose, too, that the peak of amateur activity that seems discernable around 1892-1895 may have been stimulated by the success of the Théâtre-Libre, itself sprung from an amateur cercle, which possibly served as an encouraging example to others.

Among a host of lesser societies and cercles active during this period, mention might be made of the Agricole, Arts Intimes, Arts Libéraux, Artistes Dramatiques, Capucines, Castagnettes, Central, La Croûte, Escholiers, Estourneaulx, Francs-Bourgeois, Gaulois, Grelots, Joyeulx, Le Masque, Mathurins, L'Obole, Pigalle, Les Planches, La Rampe, La Scène, Union Artistique and Volney. Of these, some were of particular historical interest: the Escholiers, which Lugné-Poe had helped to found and which for a while played a significant role in the theatrical avant-garde, one of the longest-lived and most respected;<sup>40</sup> the Cercle Gaulois, because of its association with Antoine; the Pigalle, oldest of the cercles, with its own tiny theatre in the rue des Martyrs;<sup>41</sup> and the prestigious Cercle artistique et littéraire de la rue Volney.

The cercles were not usually given over exclusively to theatricals. Music formed an important part of the activities of many,<sup>42</sup> and poetry recitations and monologues were also often on the programme. Their membership, objectives and organization varied considerably. L'Obole, for instance, was a cooperative of would-be playwrights who banded together to finance productions of their own works, while on the other hand the Cercle Volney was relatively prosperous and mondain, and in its productions the leading

roles were often taken by established professionals.

The significance of the cercles in the theatrical activity of the time has been described by Henry Gidel in Le Théâtre de Georges Feydeau (p.37):

Ces associations - qui n'ont guère d'équivalent de nos jours - constituent alors de véritables pépinières d'acteurs, d'auteurs, de directeurs de théâtre ou de metteurs en scène et de journalistes. Leur importance actuellement quelque peu méconnue n'échappe point aux critiques de l'époque qui assistent assez fréquemment aux représentations qu'ils donnent et leur consacrent feuillets ou articles.

Thanks to this documentation, we do at least know enough about their repertoire to affirm that the comic genres were well represented, and to appreciate that cercles had a part of some significance to play in the career of a comic dramatist such as Feydeau.

#### The "First Avant-Garde": 6.i André Antoine and the Théâtre-Libre

André Antoine was born in Limoges on 31 January 1858, the eldest of the four children of a humbly situated family which moved to Paris when he was eight years old. Obligated to earn his living from the age of thirteen, he held various poorly paid jobs, did five years military service (partly in Tunisia), and arrived at the age of twenty-nine as a modest employee of the Paris Compagnie du Gaz.

Although his formal schooling had ended with the certificat d'études, the young Antoine possessed a strong urge for self-improvement, what he himself described as

une avidité prodigieuse d'apprendre et de regarder.

He read voraciously, often going without meals in order to buy books; took full advantage of the libraries, reading-rooms, galleries and museums of Paris; and followed

evening classes on everything from art history to elocution.

His dominant passion was for the theatre. By way of training, he followed one of the numerous private cours de déclamation available, but he failed to gain admission to the Conservatoire. His dream of becoming an actor seemed vain, but he clung on to the fringes of the theatre, as occasion offered, serving either in the claque or in the ranks of the supers at the Comédie-Française and other theatres.

He was also a very keen member of one of the amateur dramatic societies which burgeoned in Paris towards the end of the nineteenth century. This particular one was the Cercle Gaulois, and its normal repertoire was the usual range of well-tried dramas, comedies, proverbes and vaudevilles; but Antoine headed a faction within the society which wanted to attempt more substantial and up-to-date plays, and eventually this group broke away under the nom de guerre of Le Théâtre-Libre.<sup>43</sup>

The Théâtre-Libre gave its historic first performance at the Cercle Gaulois's little wooden playhouse in the Passage de l'Elysée des Beaux-Arts, off the Place Pigalle, on Wednesday, 30 March 1887, at what the invitation characteristically specified as

8 heures très-précises du soir.

It consisted of four one-act plays, the chief attraction being Jacques Damour, adapted from Emile Zola's story by one of his disciples, Léon Hennique. Another member of Zola's groupe de Médan, Paul Alexis, had adapted one of the other pieces from an original by the Realist Duranty, while a third was by Jules Vidal, who was associated with Goncourt's Grenier circle. Thus the Théâtre-Libre had

links with the Naturalist school from its beginnings.

It was quickly recognized that the new company differed from the usual run of amateur groups, by its concentration on staging unperformed works by contemporary authors, by its fresh and original style of presentation, and above all by the singular talent and single-minded devotion to the theatre shown by its leader. In acknowledgement of its special status, its performances were regularly reviewed in the press like those of professional companies.<sup>44</sup> The impression made by the Théâtre-Libre was in fact such that in July 1887, Antoine gave up his job with the gas company to commit himself full-time to management, production and acting.

Forced to leave the Elysée des Beaux-Arts in October, the company moved first to the Théâtre-Montmartre, generously made available to them on Fridays, the resident troupe's weekly relâche. Then, from the summer of 1888 the Théâtre-Libre found its definitive home at the Menus-Plaisirs in the Boulevard de Strasbourg. Never very secure financially, it managed nevertheless to keep going until the spring of 1894, when Antoine was forced to hand over the management to Larochelle. He had staged fifty-four programmes, comprising 111 plays, virtually all of them receiving their first performance in France. Under Larochelle, the theatre presented a further thirteen plays before finally disbanding in 1896.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to its general effect on the French theatre as a whole, which was of the highest importance, the Théâtre-Libre exercised a certain influence directly on comedy. Though its characteristic genre was the drame, over thirty plays which could be called more or less comic were produced at the Théâtre-Libre by Antoine, a fair proportion



of its total output.

Nor were its comic works all of that harsh and jeering kind known as the comédie rosse, although that form was particularly associated in all minds with Antoine's company. Perhaps a half might colourably be so described; but not Porto-Riche's bitter-sweet La Chance de Françoise (1888), for instance, nor Courteline's hilarious yet compassionate Lidoire (1891) and Boubouroche (1893), while nothing could be further removed from rosserie than the precious pirouetting of Banville's Le Baiser, created by Antoine and his Mlle Deneuilly on 23 December 1887 before being staged at the Comédie-Française.

#### 6.ii Theatre-Antoine

After the closure of the Théâtre-Libre, in 1896, Antoine earned his living as an actor for a few months and then became co-director of the Odéon with Paul Ginisty. His tenure was very brief: he was appointed in June, and by November jealousies, dissensions and back-stage politics had eroded his position and forced his resignation. Nevertheless, the very fact that Antoine, with virtually no training and less than ten years professional experience, should have been appointed to such an important post at all surely testifies to the recognition his work had achieved.

For a time he returned to acting, and toured widely throughout Europe. On his return to Paris in 1897, he established a new venture at the Menus-Plaisirs: the Théâtre-Antoine. The change of name betokened a real difference from the Théâtre-Libre. Though many of the plays and players were the same and Antoine's fundamental principles remained unchanged, the Théâtre-Antoine was no longer a

théâtre d'essai financed by subscription, but a normal commercial enterprise, though an adventurous one. Antoine still championed new playwrights and drama from abroad, for example, but the new formula allowed for revivals and for relatively long runs of profitable successes. The theatre had its share of such hits, ranging from the scandalous Les Avariés to the picturesque Vieil Heidelberg, though Antoine privately grew rather bored by giving the fiftieth or hundredth performance of the same play, and was glad to hand the Théâtre-Antoine over to his chosen successor, Gémier, in 1906, to return to the Odéon and new challenges.

#### 6.iii Antoine's Importance

Antoine's significance in theatrical history has been admirably schematized by Denis Bablet in a single sentence:

Antoine n'est point l'homme d'une théorie définie une fois pour toutes, il est le promoteur d'une politique théâtrale qui implique une attitude morale, une orientation du répertoire, une conception particulière du travail scénique. 46

We are now better placed than his contemporaries to see that Antoine's most valuable and enduring contribution has been a certain conception of the theatre, rather than the more obvious specifics of his distinctive stagecraft or even his example in extending the repertorial range of the French theatre.

Antoine's particular orientation du répertoire stemmed from three things:

- 1) His discovery of new playwrights;
- 2) His pioneering productions of foreign drama;
- 3) His association with Naturalism.

It was customary for theatrical managers of the time to

aver that they were eager to stage plays by new dramatists; but usually their words were empty, according to the persistent complaints of aspiring playwrights and of the critics. Antoine's professed interest in unknown talents was genuine, however; he used to read two or three new scripts a day, and his matchless record for sponsoring new playwrights speaks for itself. Of course, not all his discoveries proved of lasting value; but he staged the first plays of an impressive number of those who were to be regarded, rightly or wrongly, as the leading playwrights of the belle époque, including Ancey, Lavedan, Courteline, and Coolus to mention only writers of comedies.<sup>47</sup>

Antoine's unique role in the introduction of foreign drama into France was really an outgrowth of his search for new playwrights. He would probably have preferred to find these in France if he could, but the fact that so much of what was truly original in drama was being written outside France led him to become the first champion of a cosmopolitan repertory in the French theatre, and this is now recognized as one of his major achievements.

To place his efforts in their proper perspective, it should be recalled that, apart from the Romantics' interest in Shakespeare and Schiller, throughout the nineteenth century France's place in world theatre had been exclusively that of an exporter. In their overwhelming majority, French playgoers and theatre professionals alike were satisfied that their theatre had nothing whatever to learn from abroad, and believed that all foreign drama of any merit was, in fact, imitated from French models.

Antoine was less sanguine than most about the current

standard of the French stage, and looked to foreign theatres for usable new ideas on both play-making and stagecraft. He scored a triumph with his first production of a foreign play: Tolstoy's La Puissance des ténèbres, in February 1888. The Théâtre-Libre was to stage ten more, originating from Italy, America, Russia, Germany, Holland, and of course Scandinavia: it was the Théâtre-Libre which gave the first performances in France of Ibsen, Strindberg and Björnson.

The third factor in Antoine's orientation du répertoire - his Naturalism - is so well established that what is required here is not so much proof as mitigation:

Antoine est surtout connu comme un naturaliste à tous crins, comme un homme qui attachait des quartiers de viande sur la scène, qui faisait tourner le dos aux acteurs, et qui avait illustré la théorie du quatrième mur. <sup>48</sup>

Antoine had set out with the sincere resolve to make the Théâtre-Libre a truly eclectic stage, at the service of experimentation of various kinds, but his good intentions were thwarted by a conjunction of factors: to some extent, perhaps, his personal literary preferences; his mimetic production style, which was most suited to realistic texts; but above all his early tactical alliance with the Naturalists, which caused the Théâtre-Libre to be perceived as a Naturalist fief, a reputation which tended to become self-fulfilling. In addition, the foundation of the Théâtre d'Art in 1890 encouraged a Naturalist/Idealist polarization of the avant-garde theatre.

So by about 1891, Antoine had regretfully to recognize the de facto existence of a limiting poncif du Théâtre-Libre. He himself had come to be seen as the arch-Naturalist of the French stage, and, as Mordecai Gorelik once put it,

Antoine was to spend the rest of his life trying to peel this label off his back. 49

He appears to have seen the founding of the Théâtre-Antoine as an opportunity to make a fresh start, and its repertory testifies to his efforts to retain his eclectic independence, as does his later work at the Odéon.

As was implied earlier, Antoine's orientation du répertoire was to some extent linked to his conception particulière du travail scénique, in that realistic works were especially suited to Antoine's customary style of presentation. It is true that in the latter part of his career as a metteur en scène (let us say, from his Lear of 1904), Antoine would sometimes employ a degree of stylization which equalled or indeed surpassed the simplified staging of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre; but in this earlier period his productions were usually realistic in their acting, costume, properties, sets and lighting.

It would not be just, though, to take his verism as simply an aesthetic preference, nor yet as the mere imitation of the visible surfaces of reality undertaken for its own sake as an exercise in trompe l'oeil. Actually, Antoine's theatrical style was closely related to his conception of the real world, a positivistic world view influenced by the theories of Taine and of the Naturalists on environmental and evolutionary determinism.

Thus, for example, the thesis that human conduct was a product of

la race, le milieu et le moment

had a very direct bearing on his stage settings. Like Zola,<sup>50</sup> he believed that stage decor should show the causal relation that existed in real life between a person's environment and

his behaviour. Because a setting was a source of information, it had naturally to be accurate: only if it were correct could the full truth and the full coherence of the character emerge.

In those days, the usual practice for elaborating a production was to start, in effect, with an empty stage, in order to establish moves and jeux de scène untrammelled, in a sort of material void; and only then to derive from these the secondary, non-human adjuncts of set, properties and lighting. A few supplementary touches of local colour or pure decoration might be added, but substantially this kind of set-dressing represented a utilitarian minimum.

Antoine's criterion that the setting should be relevant to character rather than simply to action resulted in his treating a stage setting as if it were a real place, with a sort of autonomous existence extending beyond the narrow use made of it in the play. It was laid out as such a place would be in real life, not in accordance with the actors' convenience, because

C'est le milieu qui détermine les mouvements  
des personnages, et non les mouvements des  
personnages qui déterminent le milieu. 51

It was furnished with all kinds of items, even those gratuitous from the point of view of the action, which were appropriate to such places in the real world,

Les objets familiers dont se servent, même  
en dehors de l'action projetée, dans les  
entr'actes, les habitants du lieu,

clocks that would not be consulted, glasses no-one would drink from, papers which would remain unread from the rise of the curtain to its final fall. Such objects did not need the justification of ustensilitéé: Antoine believed that they

had value by their very presence, as parts of the total "truth" of the situation.<sup>52</sup>

The ways of the real world again outweighed the received practices and supposed laws of the stage in Antoine's handling of stage composition, lighting and acting, though it was sometimes insinuated that the Théâtre-Libre's lifelike acting was a chance result of the untrained actors' lack of technique. Whether produced by accident or intention, the style was to have a marked influence on French acting.

Antoine's most important legacy, however, has proved to lie not so much in the plays he staged or in his particular style of stagecraft as in his more general ideas about the status of the theatre. Probably the key notion in Antoine's thinking was simply that "Drama is an art". Of course, in 1887, this axiom seemed accepted on every hand: performers of all kinds were called artistes, and drama, whatever its intentions or pretensions, was routinely referred to as l'art dramatique. More often than not, though, the phrase was an unreflecting façon de parler. Antoine took it to be entirely and literally true, and followed it through to its consequences.

If drama is indeed an art and not a branch of show business, a different set of standards applies. Whereas it is legitimate in business to balance quality against cost-effectiveness and convenience, art implies a striving for the highest attainable excellence. Antoine accepted this principle, and got into financial difficulties at the Théâtre-Libre and at the Odéon largely through failing to temper with commercial prudence his insistence on having the best of everything, from elaborate and costly sets and

costumes down to posters and programmes that are collector's pieces.

Recognizing drama's status as an art also meant according it new dignity and importance. Perhaps the sociétaires of the Comédie-Française already thought of themselves not as performers but as artists in the fullest sense; but Antoine impressed on his humble company that they too were artists - not by virtue of the prestige of the institution they were attached to, but by their calling. He also stressed that their status as artists carried with it serious responsibilities, above all to their art itself, and to the specific play on which they were working.

The idea that a play was truly a work of art had implications for audiences, too. No longer merely customers but privileged participants, they were encouraged towards the appropriate state of respectful attention by a number of practical measures. Antoine tackled the endemic problem of late-comers by refusing them admission; campaigned against the traditional horseshoe seating plan which placed many spectators vis-à-vis instead of facing the stage; and adopted the practice of Bayreuth and the Meininger of extinguishing the house-lights during the performance, to focus attention on the stage. In these and various ways, Antoine tried to make theatre attendance less of a social event or a commercial transaction and more of a genuinely cultural experience.

It was because the Théâtre-Libre was both decommercialized and artistically serious that its example was so influential. Of course, the Théâtre-Libre itself owed a great deal to the Meininger; but the way in which Duke



George's company was structured and financed made it a special case, and it was the Théâtre-Libre formula which served as the model for an avant-garde theatre, showing that a relatively small, poor company could make a valuable contribution to the theatre, particularly as regards experimentation and catering to specialized minority publics. Some of Antoine's immediate successors imitated the Théâtre-Libre closely, adopting its club status and its reliance on subscriptions for its financial base, for instance; but there is a sense in which all "little theatres", théâtres d'essai, studio theatres and the like are to some degree Antoine's heirs.<sup>53</sup>

#### 6.iv The Théâtre d'Art and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre

Aurélien-Marie Lugné (1869-1940), known in the theatre as Lugné-Poe, seems to have been connected, at one time or another, with virtually all the most important avant-garde theatrical ventures of the Eighties and Nineties.

In November 1886, while he was still a pupil at the Lycée Condorcet, he was one of the principal founders of the Cercle des Escholiers, which was to become one of the most significant and long-lived of the drama clubs that sprang up so profusely towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Having fallen out with the Escholiers in May 1887, Lugné next joined the Théâtre-Libre, where he played a number of supporting roles between 1888 and 1890.

Meanwhile, he was studying at the Conservatoire, a pupil of Gustave Worms. Equipped with a modest deuxième prix de comédie, he left in 1892 to join Porel's new Grand-Théâtre. Still his temperament inclined him more towards the avant-garde. He had rejoined the Escholiers in 1891, and in

December 1892, he mounted an important production of Ibsen's La Dame de la mer for them.

In May and December 1891, he had also made guest appearances with the Théâtre d'Art, and even before the Grand-Théâtre came to its early end in March 1893, Lugné asked to be released from his contract with Porel to throw in his lot with the struggling but ambitious young company.

The Théâtre d'Art was an avant-garde group which had grown out of a merger between an evanescent Théâtre Idéaliste and the Théâtre Mixte, founded by Paul Fort, a poet yet in his teens, to be an experimental theatre of poetry and suggestion countervailing the naturalistic bias of the Théâtre-Libre.

The performances of the Théâtre-Mixte, which opened on 27 June 1890, and those of the Théâtre d'Art, which succeeded it from 18 November 1890, were usually spectacles coupés, composed of anything up to nine short items, most often one-act plays, though recitations of lyric poems were also featured. In its brief career, the Théâtre Mixte presented a good proportion of comic drama in its programmes, including a curiously stilted and dated one-acter by Paul Fort himself, La Petite bête. The Théâtre d'Art, however, appears to have taken a more solemn view of its theatrical mission, so that although its productions did include such works as Alexis Martin's Débat du coeur et de l'estomac and Charles Morice's Chérubin, the company generally inclined much more towards mystères and dramas.

When Lugné joined the Théâtre d'Art, it had some half-dozen spectacles to its credit, but was in parlous financial straits. Lugné brought with him a cherished project: to

stage the five-act Symbolist drama Pelléas et Mélisande by Maurice Maeterlinck, two of whose one-act plays had already been performed by the Théâtre d'Art.

While it was in preparation, Paul Fort gave up the leadership of the company, worn out by the long struggle, and it was left to Camille Mauclair and Lugné to see Pelléas et Mélisande through, first to an artistic success in Paris, then to a financial success in Brussels. The budget was balanced, the company saved; and the theatre changed its name once more to become the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre.

The name has a certain programmatic ring about it, suggesting a belief in the primacy of the work performed, placing it above other considerations such as the personal interests of star performers, for instance; and as leader of the company, Lugné was indeed to follow Antoine's example in this respect, as in many others.

Lugné-Poe's published references to his former chief (for example, in his memoirs La Parade), are mostly very disparaging, and yet at the most fundamental level he seems to have been more like Antoine than he realized in his approach to the theatre. He shared, for example, the most basic tenet of Antoine's creed: his high seriousness about the value and dignity of the theatre. For both, the theatre was an art rather than a business. Both were concerned to achieve the highest possible quality in every aspect of their work. Like Antoine, Lugné believed in the importance of ensemble playing. Like Antoine again, he showed a keen interest in foreign drama at a time when this was distinctly rare in France, and he too made genuine efforts to find unknown French playwrights and to give them their chance.

Yet while they were tacitly agreed on so many things, in the concrete execution of their work they adopted diametrically opposed aesthetic styles. Antoine was at that time a Naturalist, by and large. Lugné was at heart a Symbolist, albeit at times a timid one, according to Jacques Robichez.

The difference in styles can be quite readily and clearly exemplified simply by comparing the stage decors of the Théâtre-Libre and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. Antoine's aim was ideally the perfect reproduction of visible reality. The Symbolist view of the matter had been expressed by Pierre Quillard in 1891, in an article significantly entitled "De l'inutilité absolue de la mise en scène exacte",<sup>54</sup> in which the key phrase is probably the claim that

La parole crée le décor comme le reste,<sup>55</sup>

implying that it is as easy for the spectator to accept some hanging strips of brown calico as a forest as it is for him to believe that the actress Marie Aubry is a medieval prince named Pelléas. Symbolist art presupposes a very active participation by the public, whose individual imaginations, experiences and mental associations are required to "complete" the total work from the suggestive scenario which is all that the Symbolist artist supplies. Of course, it is true that the Oeuvre's summary decors were also relatively cheap, a boon to an impoverished company; but happily theory and thrift coincided here, to make an authentic Symbolist virtue of an economic necessity.

Although Lugné's Théâtre de l'Oeuvre occupies a very significant place in the history of the French stage, its contribution to comic drama between 1893 and 1900 was meagre.

As his writings show, Lugné-Poe himself was certainly not devoid of a certain fantasy, nor of a sense of humour, of a rather waspish kind, and several contemporaries competent to judge maintained that as an actor he was at his best in comedy. Nevertheless, his company, like the Théâtre d'Art from which it derived, was generally inclined to be gravely "arty" and intense. True, it was the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre which staged Ubu roi, and it is hard to think of another company of the time which could have done so; but even among the Oeuvre's productions, Ubu roi was something unique and even anomalous. It was also a turning-point in the theatre's history, because after the scandal of Jarry's play, Lugné broke his ties with French Symbolism.

Apart from creating Ubu roi, the Oeuvre's chief service to comedy was the staging of Tristan Bernard's early one-acters: Les Pieds nickelés, his first, in 1895, in which Lugné was an excellent Omer Arthur; and that minor classic Le Fardeau de la liberté in 1897. These were in no way Symbolist works, of course, and while they were evidently performed more than competently by the company, the sens de la maison does not seem uniquely suited to these pieces, which might equally well have been staged, like those of Bernard's friend Courteline, at the Théâtre-Libre, for instance.

The theatre's other productions of comic plays were really too few to permit valid generalization, but perhaps one might detect in them a certain penchant for satire of a sneering sort, directed now against the seamier side of the financial world (La Brebis), now against Jews (La Dernière croisade), now against the new Bohème of the Decadent move-

ment (L'Ecole de l'idéal) - an egregious case of fouling one's own nest.

In fact, though, the few available specimens are so diverse, ranging from the shallow smartness of La Dernière croisade to the revivals of Measure for Measure and Gogol's Revizor, that one is obliged to admit that if the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre did have a distinctive comic style, it is difficult to determine in what it can have consisted.

The Theatres: Footnotes

1. Henriet, 84.
2. Henriet, 37.
3. Henriet, 48.
4. Dussane, la Comédie-Française, 56-67.
5. See also M. Descotes, Le Public de théâtre, 310-12; S.B. John, "The Drama of Money and Class", 75.
6. Henriet, 84-85.
7. Descotes, Le Public de théâtre, 310.
8. Miquel, 126.
9. Barrault & Benmussa, 11-12.
10. Ibid., 12.
11. Miquel, loc. cit.
12. In Le Bien public, 12 June 1876.
13. Touchard, 245.
14. On the Bodinière, see Adérer, Le Théâtre à côté.

The Theatres (3): Footnotes

15. Crépineau, 354.
16. In his excellent notes to Zola's Œuvres complètes (10, 1138), M. Mitterand stated that the Château d'Eau was founded in 1886: this is apparently a misprint.
17. Lorcey, 98.
18. Peter, Le Théâtre et la vie, 1, 241, Note 1.
19. See Antona-Traversi, L'Histoire du Grand-Guignol.
20. Gerould, 18.
21. Murcia (247) took Maurice Magnier's Théâtre-Salon to be the origin of the Grand-Guignol. Ernest Short (135) believed that Max Maurey was the theatre's founder.
22. Murcia, loc. cit.
23. Gerould, loc. cit.
24. Crépineau, 376.
25. See Pierrefitte, "Le Théâtre des Folies-Marigny".
26. In Le Bien public, 19 June 1876.

27. Plunkett, 283.
28. In Le Bien public, 15 January 1877.
29. Henriet, 65.
30. Alias le Saxe aphone, whose voice was nevertheless immortalized by Mallarmé.
31. In Le Bien public, 19 June 1876.

Cafés-Concerts, Music-Halls and Cabarets: Footnotes

32. "Les Cafés-concerts", Impressions, 2, 288.
33. Henry Gidel, Le Théâtre de Feydeau, 37.
34. Jacques-Charles, Le Caf' conc', 152.
35. "Le mot même de music-hall semble inconnu en France avant 1900. Le premier établissement de ce genre, en France, ce fut l'Alhambra, fondé par un Anglais, à la manière anglaise." (Robert Burnand, La Vie quotidienne en France, 1870-1900, 225).
36. The date given in Alain Weill's 100 Years of the Posters of the Folies-Bergère and Music-Halls of Paris (page 7), 1895, is no doubt a misprint.
37. This energetic entrepreneur had also given Paris the Nouveau Cirque and the Montagnes Russes, had been co-proprietor of the Bal du Moulin-Rouge, and had devised the pari-mutuel.
38. See John Houchin, "The Origins of the Cabaret Artistique".
39. See Pruner's introduction to the Garnier-Flammarion selection of Courteline's Théâtre, 17.

Dramatic societies and Cercles: Footnotes

40. For the Escholiers, see Bourdon, Le Livre d'or des Escholiers.
41. For the Cercle Pigalle, see Adérer, Le Théâtre à côté.
42. The Cercle Pigalle numbered Bizet and Delibes among its members, for example, and the Cercle de l'Union Artistique was "more popularly known as the Cercle des Mirlitons or the Jockey Club of musicians." (Mina Curtiss, Bizet and his World, 112).

The "First Avant-Garde": Footnotes

43. The programmatic name, often imitated, was devised by Arthur Byl (Antoine, Souvenirs, 1, 23-24).
44. See Emile Morlot's comment in R.A.D., 10 (1888), 44.



45. In "La Réforme d'André Antoine" (161), these were apparently included in Veinstein's statistics: "124 oeuvres nouvelles, 114 auteurs, dont 69 débutants," and indeed several had been accepted by Antoine before his resignation.
46. Bablet, La Mise en scène, 13.
47. Voltz' remark that the Théâtre-Libre "voit les débuts de Porto-Riche et de Renard" (161) is incorrect on both counts.
48. A.-P. Antoine, "Le Naturalisme d'Antoine: une légende", 233.
49. Gorelik, 130.
50. See especially Le Naturalisme au théâtre, chapter 7: "Les Décors et les accessoires" (Oeuvres complètes, 11, 327-39), and also Bablet, Le Décor de théâtre, 110-14.
51. Antoine, "Causerie sur la mise en scène".
52. "Eine Eigentümlichkeit des naturalistischen Theaters ist es gerade, die Requisiten naturgetreu auf die Bühne zu stellen und sie somit zu Mitspielern zu machen, von denen unmittelbare Wirkungen auf die agierenden Personen ausgehen." (Grimm, 25)
53. "C'est du Théâtre-Libre que sont issus directement l'Oeuvre et, de façon plus souterraine, le Vieux-Colombier de Copeau et les entreprises qui ont suivi: Atelier de Dullin, théâtre de Jouvet." (Pia, 493). Veinstein's article cited above is largely devoted to Antoine's influence.
54. In R.A.D., 22 (1st May 1891), 180-183.
55. Ibid., 181.

THE FORMS OF COMIC DRAMAThe Problem of Generic Names

Any attempt to describe the forms of comic drama in late nineteenth-century France is bedevilled by the fluidity of the terms then in use. The elasticity of comédie, the evolution of the vaudeville and the influence of mere modishness, favouring one label at the expense of another, were among several factors leading to terminological anarchy.

Hesitation among the playwrights themselves about the actual definitions of the various traditional genres is evidenced by a proliferation of demi-teintes worthy of Polonius: à-propos, à-propos-folie-vaudeville, à-propos-parodie, à-propos-pochade, à-propos-vaudeville; bouffonnerie; comédie, comédie-bouffe, comédie fantaisiste, comédie mêlée de chant, comédie-opérette, comédie satirique, comédie-vaudeville; fantaisie, fantaisie-bouffe, fantaisie mondaine, fantaisie-vaudeville; farce, farce tabarinique; folie, folie-vaudeville; opérette-revue, opérette-vaudeville; pièce, pièce bouffe, pièce fantaisiste, pièce mêlée de chant; prologue-revue; proverbe; revue, revuette, revue fantaisiste; saynète; scène, scène comique; tableau; vaudeville, vaudeville-bouffe, vaudeville-féerie, vaudeville-opérette and vaudeville-revue; besides such arch, ad hoc whimsies as charentonnade, déraillement d'esprit, leçon d'astronomie, parodie à la fourchette, pièce de carnaval or vaudeville échevelé.

It would not be worth trying to characterize every fugitive hybrid or sub-genre comprising two or three specimens, but some half-dozen basic comic genres might usefully be distinguished.

## Comédie

In the prevailing confusion over the naming of genres, it seems somehow fitting that the least satisfactory specification of all should be the very word comédie itself. It is, of course, well known that the French word may simply mean "a play" - of any kind - as well as denoting a particular sort of play; but even in its narrower acceptation, comédie was then applied to a wider variety of works than is now usual.

Thus, before about 1900, when pièce gained increased currency in this sense, comédie was the name commonly given even to quite grave and earnest dramas by playwrights such as Augier, Dumas fils, Sardou, Lemaître, Lavedan, Donnay, Brieux and Porto-Riche. Nor was it a misnomer: centuries of usage justified its application to drama which occupied the middle ground between tragedy and farce, including that

whose object was the realistic imitation of manners, not their caricatural portrayal.<sup>1</sup>

Yet although validated by tradition, a term latitudinous enough to accommodate both La Femme de Claude and Un fil à la patte is clearly of limited use as a categorical description. Some of the dramatists themselves evidently found the word inconveniently equivocal and used the expression comédie dramatique to distinguish a comédie in which le comique had no significant part to play; but this helpful practice was unfortunately not general. So the word comédie on a playbill actually guaranteed little more than that the work in question was neither tragedy, féerie nor operetta, though it might still prove in the event to be a drame bourgeois or a vaudeville.

The fact that comédie was so broadly defined no doubt

had a bearing on its being by far the commonest class of play on the Parisian stage of the period.

### Vaudeville

The vaudeville was the other most numerous and characteristic form of comic play in France at this time. It may legitimately and usefully be recognized as a distinct genre<sup>2</sup> despite the fact that the line of demarcation between it and the comédie was imprecise and subject both to fashion and even to personal whim; so that the very pattern of the modern vaudeville, Labiche and Marc Michel's Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie, was described on its title-page as a comédie. One man's comedy was another man's vaudeville.

Although it chances that Feydeau himself was one of those who preferred not to style his plays vaudevilles,<sup>3</sup> for an account of what the vaudeville was during this period it would be pointless to try to better the excellent preliminary chapters of Le Théâtre de Feydeau, in which Henry Gidel analyses so clearly and soundly the evolution, character and resources of the genre.

He argues persuasively there that much of the terminological confusion surrounding comédie and vaudeville was the result of the way the genre developed. Towards the middle of the century, vaudeville lost its original function as a sort of theatrical pasquinade. It was Scribe who crossed the traditionally episodic, loosely-structured vaudeville with the comedy of intrigue derived from Beaumarchais to produce a new, "well-made", plot-centred hybrid: comédie-vaudeville.

Then, around 1860, another decisive change occurred when the genre's most obvious distinguishing feature, its couplets, withered away. It then seemed to many that the

resulting plays bore so little resemblance, either in form or in function, to the vaudeville from which they were derived that the name was no longer appropriate, and that the commodious term comédie was to be preferred.

No doubt, too, the snobbery of some playwrights adduced to the same result. It was generally accepted that the dramatic genres were hierarchically ordered, some by their nature being absolutely "higher" than others; and whereas the vaudeville was unquestionably "low" -

Art de faire rire sans orthographe,  
as Labiche once defined it, - the writing of comédies may well have seemed to put one in the same respectable frame of reference as Messrs Augier, Dumas fils and Legouvé, Academicians all and pillars of the Comédie-Française and Gymnase.

As practised between 1870 and 1900, French vaudevilles were of two basic types. The vaudeville à tiroirs retained the episodic structure which the vaudeville had had before the Scribean reforms. Prime attention was focussed on the individual episodes, which were valued for their own sake, while the plot was hardly more than a convenient technical device for justifying, ordering and linking them. Since it was regarded as a means rather than an end, the plot was often treated cavalierly. Instead of showing his skill by the solidity, plausibility and ingenuity of his intrigue, the vaudevilliste directed his best efforts towards the fullest exploitation of a succession of situations.

Vaudevilles à tiroirs continued to be written after 1870 by a number of playwrights including Ernest Blum, Meilhac and Halévy, Albert Millaud, Eugène Nus, Raoul Toché and Albert

Wolff; but the chief exponent of the form was Edmond Gondinet, whose imagination seems to have been naturally disposed to work in terms of tableaux, as his comédies also show.

However, the dominant type of vaudeville during this period was the hennequinade, or the vaudeville structuré, as Henry Gidel has named it. In this, the chief business in hand is the unfolding of a plot, as amusingly and intriguingly as may be, from an initial problem to its eventual solution. The episodes, being but the stages along the way, are of subordinate importance, though of course a vaudevilliste who knew his trade would choose them with care for their comic potential.

As elaborated by Alfred Hennequin, this type of vaudeville treated as a special merit the ingenious complication of the intrigue.

In direct consequence, many vaudevilles had relatively long and elaborate expositions, sometimes occupying up to a third of the total length of the piece, during which the necessary preparations were laid down for the involved sequence of collisions, rebounds and deflections planned to follow, much as a billiard-player sets out the balls for his trick stroke.

This done, the action proper would be set in train, very often, as Henry Gidel has shown, following well-established patterns. These include what we might call "The Morning After Plot", dealing with the aftermath of too carefree a previous night (e.g. L'Affaire de la rue de Lourcine, La Dame de chez Maxim); "The Tangled Web Plot",<sup>4</sup> in which an initial deception produces remorselessly escalating consequences (e.g. Champignol malgré lui, L'Anglais tel qu'on le parle);

"The Elusive Object Plot",<sup>5</sup> of which Un Chapeau de paille d'Italie is obviously the classic example; "The Conditional Fortune Plot", in which a needy hero must fulfil some difficult and preferably bizarre prerequisite to receive a large sum from a will or a wealthy relative (e.g. Occupe-toi d'Amélie); "The Sleeping Dogs Plot", where an attempt to redress a real or imagined grievance produces unforeseen problems (e.g. La Main leste, 29° à l'ombre); and perhaps a few others.

If the inciting moments in vaudeville tended to conform to a handful of archetypes, the development of the action also relied extensively on mechanisms particularly associated with the genre. Perhaps the most characteristic of these was the case of mistaken (or assumed) identity, which was so prevalent, indeed, that the hennequinade is often referred to as the vaudeville à quiproquos.

The untimely meeting is also identified as a recurrent device by Henry Gidel; and clearly Feydeau was the virtuoso of this particular figure.

Although not, of course, restricted to the vaudeville, the péripétie had a very special importance for the genre, according to André Roussin:

Le vaudeville est un genre qui suppose un jeu d'entrées, de sorties, d'imbroglis, d'accumulations de toutes sortes, provoquant le rire avec des personnages sans épaisseur. Les péripéties font le vaudeville et non pas les personnages.<sup>6</sup>

The point made here about the unimportance of characterization is perfectly justified. The vaudeville was an extremely conventional dramatic form, and it was tacitly agreed between the vaudevilliste and his public that it could dispense with:

- 1) Careful character-drawing. Caricature and stereotypes sufficed.
- 2) All but a minimum of plausibility; but that was necessary. This may help to explain why audiences perfectly at ease with the wildest vaudevilles were nonplussed by the absolute fantasy of Ubu roi. The vaudeville's public would accept the utterly improbable, but not the impossible.
- 3) All pretensions to literary elegance.
- 4) Any "message" whatsoever.

In return for these concessions, audiences required:

- 1) Unalloyed entertainment. The vaudeville was pre-eminently a théâtre digestif, intended to induce good cheer and a sense of well being, and it was no part of its function to question, threaten or preach.
- 2) An intriguing plot, affording as many surprises as possible while yet remaining within the "logic" of the given facts. As Feydeau once put it,

Le public vous est reconnaissant de ne pas tricher.

- 3) A hectic pace, which whirled the audience past dull patches and implausibilities, achieved as early in the exposition, and maintained as late in the dénouement as the playwright could manage.
- 4) Copious laughter, the sine qua non of the genre. A vaudeville which evoked only smiles or intermittent laughter was a failed vaudeville.

These were the criteria by which a vaudeville was to be judged. They were not, perhaps, conducive to the creation of



great drama in the fullest sense, but they did allow opportunity enough for the very finest craftsmen to achieve a kind of technical perfection.

### Farce

A catalogue by genres of the comic drama of the period 1870-1900 might tend to suggest the surprizing conclusion that farce hardly existed in France at that time. However, closer investigation shows clearly that it was the term which was out of favour, not the thing itself. "Farce" seems to have had definite historical connotations, so that the description was more or less reserved for a few adaptations or pastiches of mediaeval or renaissance farces, such as those of Gassies or Alexis Martin.

The "farces" of the English-speaking stage found their equivalent in the French vaudevilles, folies-vaudevilles and comédies-bouffes. Indeed, Jessica Milner Davis' excellent little study Farce draws extensively on the vaudevilles of Courteline, Feydeau and Labiche for its paradigms.

André Roussin, whose views on this topic should be heard with respect, has argued that vaudeville and farce are two separate, and sometimes contrasting genres:

L'erreur est le domaine du vaudeville;  
l'injustice est celui de la farce... Le  
vaudeville ne dépasse pas le phénomène du  
rire, tandis que la farce, par la notion  
d'injustice qu'elle suppose, implique une  
morale. On ne généralise pas sur un  
vaudeville - on ne peut que généraliser sur  
une farce. On n'a pas de morale à tirer d'un  
vaudeville - une farce en a toujours une que  
l'on pourrait énoncer comme pour les fables,  
une fois l'histoire racontée. Le vaudeville  
est gratuit; la farce exemplaire.

Courteline écrivait des farces (et son théâtre  
est tragi-comique), Feydeau des vaudevilles (et  
son théâtre - magistral dans le genre - ne  
relève que de la bonne humeur).<sup>7</sup>

These opinions may be as true as they are interesting; but however valid and desirable it might be to make a distinction between the two, it is a matter of fact that nineteenth-century French usage did not do so.

### Revue

The revue of this period was the heir to a well-established tradition which had devised the genre's special function and form.<sup>8</sup> Revues varied greatly in length, but perhaps those in one or two acts were the commonest, especially at the cafés-concerts, where they constituted only the last part of the programme. They were composed of a number of satirical sketches or tableaux, and, as the name suggests, they were a review of recent events and personalities of interest, be that interest political, social, military, industrial, economic, fiscal, educational, medical, scientific, architectural, artistic, literary, musical, theatrical or sporting.

Because of their essentially topical character, revues had short theatrical lives: a single run of a few weeks or even a few days. Yet, by the same token, their scripts are now fascinating documents of social history. Better than any other form of theatre, the revue reflects, albeit with comic distortions, what really interested the Parisians of a given period.

There is reason to believe that revues were somehow staged even during the dark days of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune troubles, though their texts are now lost, but the publication of scripts was resumed from the end of 1871, allowing assessment of trends in the genre between then and 1900.

Robert Dreyfus, author of the Petite histoire de la revue de fin d'année published in 1909, suggests that the calamities of 1870 and 1871 affected the revue in two contrasting ways. Some revues fled from the memory of the nation's troubles into plain escapism. This attitude is made explicit in Montréal and Blondeau's Qui veut voir la lune?, staged on the Christmas Eve of 1871, in which La Revue gives short shrift to the gloomy post-mortems of politicians and pretentious leader-writers, but welcomes the light-hearted pleasures represented by the pretty Marie Blanc as La Folie Bergère.

Other revues, however, offered the public the facile consolation of a chauvinisme de café-concert through optimistic, truculently revanchist tableaux in which the flag and the uniform figured prominently.

Another post-war trend noted by Dreyfus is that the expanded and increasingly heterogeneous public of the Paris theatres had led the revue to relinquish its traditional, narrowly Parisian scope in favour of subjects of more general appeal.

The revue was a largely seasonal product. Although there were occasional revues du printemps and even summer revues, the mainstay of the genre were the traditional revues de fin d'année. These would begin to appear towards mid-November, rise to a peak around the last week of the year, and dwindle away towards early March.

Since a revue had to be as up to the minute as possible, and since, too, as Zola once observed,

Pour ces sortes d'ouvrages, c'est un grand  
mérite que d'arriver premier,<sup>9</sup>

time was of the essence in their composition and production.

In consequence, they were almost invariably written by teams

of two or three playwrights, sometimes stable combinations like Blondeau and Montréal, Moreau and Lebreton, Numès and Hermil, and the trio of Jouy, Guy and Verneuil, sometimes by ad hoc alliances of experienced practitioners such as Alévy, Cottens, Delilia, Ferrier, Flers, Gavault, Marot, Péricaud, Vély and Xanrof.

Since revues were mounted not only by the lighter theatres but also by cafés-concerts, cabarets and music halls, the revue-writer's outlets were considerable, and an expert like Moreau might have a hand in as many as three or four revues in the same season.

Because of its nature, the revue was inevitably constructed à tiroirs. Attempts were dutifully made to devise a basic plot which should serve as unifying framework for the separate tableaux, but more often than not this was lost to sight in the course of the piece, and most revues were very loosely structured.

Very often, in fact, they were a mere succession of tableaux linked only by the interventions of a compère, usually assisted (even on rare occasions replaced) by a commère. These were highly specialized emplois:

Ils suivaient avec vous le spectacle en s'y mêlant et en le commentant à votre intention, avec force couplets, calembours et mots de sortie chaque fois qu'un personnage avait vidé son sac.<sup>10</sup>

By common consent, the outstanding compère and commère of their day were Louis Hesnard, alias Montrouge (1825-1903) and his wife Victoire Macé-Montrouge (1836-1898), who had worked with Offenbach in the early days of the Bouffes-Parisiens. Montrouge was an architect by training, and manager of the Athénée by occupation; but he looked and sounded like Punch,

and he and his wife had the ideal compère's gift for projecting a sense of good-natured fun, giving the Athénée's annual revue an enviable advantage over its competitors.

The content of revues varied considerably, of course, according to what was of current interest; but every self-respecting revue had one invariable feature: the parodies of recent productions at other theatres. As well as the works themselves, their performers were also lampooned, and a talented impersonator was another precious asset to any revue. This was when many an otherwise mediocre actor like Tervil came into his own, although some considerable artists also revealed a nice talent for mimicry, as when the young Réjane, in a revue at the Vaudeville, gave brilliant imitations of both Sarah and Maurice Bernhardt which visibly amused both her models.

Another feature which was to become progressively entrenched in the genre towards the turn of the century was the deployment of scantily-clothed girls which was soon to become the raison d'être of the revue at establishments like the Folies-Bergère.

The character of revue would also change markedly when satirists like P.L. Flers and "Rip" succeeded the milder revuistes of the generation of Blondeau and Montréal. Between 1870 and 1900, some respectable talents dabbled in the genre from time to time - Banville, Courteline, Donnay, Catulle Mendès - but for the most part revues were written by moderately skilled vaudevillistes at best.

The revue of this period tended to lack satirical bite. A critic writing in the Revue d'Art Dramatique in 1893 suggested some reasons for the decline:

On a souhaité souvent que la revue fût tout ce qu'elle n'est pas. On voudrait qu'elle nous rendît, avec moins de cynisme, la comédie d'Aristophane. Ce sera, sans doute, longtemps un rêve. Il y faudrait un poète d'abord et les poètes sont rares: il y faudrait aussi une liberté, disons mieux, une licence que nos mœurs ont proscrite, et peut-être justement. Ce sont les journaux qui font, chez nous, la besogne d'Aristophane; ils y apportent moins de style et moins d'invention mais tout autant d'impudence.<sup>11</sup>

These factors, combined with hasty writing, the over-production of many revuistes, the ephemeral character of the genre, its inherent structural problems and, some would say, the widespread practice of collective authorship, may help to explain why the revue, if interesting in its content, was usually disappointing as comic drama.

### Parodie

Seymour Travers' imperfect but still essential Catalogue of Nineteenth-Century French Theatrical Parodies shows that, even leaving out of account the significant proportion of parodies written for puppets and those guying lyrical works (notably the operas of Gounod and Wagner), a considerable number of plays in this category were staged between 1870 and 1900.

This might be thought a predictable outcome of the confluence of the national bent towards mockery and the period's enthusiasm for the stage. For, like any other form of parody, theatrical parody is obviously esoteric in some measure, in that it depends for its intended effect on the audience's familiarity with the play travestied, and so it thrives best among assiduous play-goers.

Further analysis of the relevant items of the Catalogue suggests some broad generalizations which might be hazarded about the genre. First, some playwrights were clearly more

prone to parody than others. As one might expect, plays which were both successful and solemn were the most tempting. Dumas fils is the most frequent butt of the parodists, by a wide margin; the dramas (rather than the comedies) of Sardou hold second place; and Hugo and Zola attract a sizeable share of attention, while lesser lights, such as Coppée or Ohnet, and comic dramatists like Meilhac and Halévy, or Pailleron, escape almost unscathed, though the conspicuous success of Cyrano de Bergerac and of La Dame de chez Maxim drew heavy fire.

The second conclusion which can be drawn from Travers' list is that the theatres most hospitable to parody seem to have been the Déjazet, Palais-Royal, Variétés and Marigny, but about half the examples recorded were staged by cafés-concerts, notably the Concert Parisien, Eldorado, Alcazar d'hiver and Scala.

Finally, it appears that the parodists themselves were almost without exception pretty minor vaudevillistes, Gavaults and Grangés at best. Many of these made four or five contributions to the genre, the most prolific being the otherwise undistinguished Louis Battaille with nine. In such mediocre hands, a genre which history shows to be capable of searching literary satire produced very disappointing results during this period.

### Proverbe Dramatique

The proverbe appears to have originated in the salons of the seventeenth century as a parlour-game resembling charades. A short, usually improvised comedy was performed, after which the spectators had to guess which well-known proverb it was intended to illustrate. In time, the guessing-game element

was abandoned, and the proverbe dramatique became simply a one-act comedy, a variety of bluette, except that it retained certain characteristics from its origins. The title, often echoed in the curtain-line, was still traditionally a proverb; the form was still especially associated with salon, rather than stage, performance; and as a consequence of this, the proverbe was normally a comédie de paravent, requiring very little in the way of resources.

Following Leclercq and Musset, undisputed master of the nineteenth-century proverbe, playwrights such as Feuillet and Pailleron occasionally used the form, and it sometimes appeared on the professional stage as a curtain-raiser.

#### Saynète, Bluette and Pochade

As applied to French plays of the late nineteenth century, saynète is another rather vague term. It suggests a play which is short (usually one act, with a few exceptions like Tristan Bernard's Cher Bébé); broadly comic; of modest intellectual and literary pretensions; and requiring a cast of only two or three.

As will be obvious, the saynète was usually ideal for salon or cercle performance, but some professionally-staged plays were offered as saynètes by their authors. However, reviewers would sometimes describe a short comédie as a saynète to indicate they thought it an insubstantial thing.

The same applied in even greater degree to the term bluette. It was rarely an author's definition of his own play, much more often a critical opinion, intended to convey that the piece was a slight, bright trifle, making no great intellectual demands. The term does not exclude qualities of wit and charm.



Pochade, another term borrowed from painters' jargon, denoted the form with the least pretensions of all, a mere sketch supposedly dashed off in haste. Naturally, most were intended for private performance, but occasionally a commercial production was presented as a pochade, be it out of candour, diffidence, or a hope of disarming criticism.

### A-propos

A case might be made for including here among the minor comic genres the short, topical pieces known as à-propos, because although in principle they need not be humorous, in practice most were indeed composed in lighter vein, and several were published as comédies.

A-propos were sometimes written to mark an occasion such as the opening or re-opening of a theatre (when they were often described as prologues d'ouverture), but the most numerous class of à-propos were those presented annually at the state-supported Comédie-Française and Odéon to celebrate the birthdays of Molière (15 January), Corneille (6 June) and Racine (21 December). Exceptionally, a Beaumarchais or a Voltaire, or a notable event in theatrical history, such as La Première du Mariage de Figaro, might be similarly commemorated.

Given the circumstances of presentation, it is not surprising that the majority of these were in verse. Zola was not unjustified in his sour generalization: "Rien de plus fade ni de plus banal d'ordinaire que ces à-propos, joués à certains anniversaires",<sup>12</sup> but a few were minor gems: Le Magister and Le Docteur sans pareil. Yet being an occasional piece the à-propos was ephemeral by nature, like the revue. It might have a single performance or a dozen at

the time of its creation, but it was almost never revived thereafter.

The genre had its specialists: Ernest d'Hervilly was not only one of the better writers of à-propos, but one of the most prolific, composing some half-dozen anecdotes about Molière for the Odéon and the Comédie-Française.

The Forms of Comic Drama: Footnotes

1. Howarth, Comic Drama, 10.
2. Despite Pierre Véber's insistence that "Le vaudeville est un genre bâtard, sans définition précise. On l'a divisé en comédie-vaudeville, en vaudeville à couplets, folie-vaudeville, etc. Il y a là une faute de classement. Si l'on savait rendre à la farce ce qui appartient à la farce, à l'opérette ce qui appartient à l'opérette, et à la comédie ce qui appartient à la comédie, le nom même de vaudeville n'existerait plus." ("Le Krach de théâtre", 104). Whether or not they were legitimate, the concept and the term were actually current during the period in question.
3. In his Georges Feydeau (10), Esteban implied that the dramatist gave up using the term after Henry Fouquier's article on the decadence of the genre in Le Figaro, 18 November 1892 (to which the comment by Véber quoted above was a reply). However, only half a dozen of Feydeau's works were staged under the term in any case, the last in 1897.
4. This category includes Baker's "deception play", without, though, being restricted to cases where the deception is "practised upon a husband, wife, lover or mistress" (Baker, 26).
5. This is the commonest type of "talisman farce", in which the talisman is "an elusive but desirable thing sought by the hero with disastrous results for the seemingly harmless characters of the play" (Davis, 65).
6. Roussin, "Farce et vaudeville", 70.
7. Ibid., 71 & 72.
8. For the evolution of the revue, see Paul d'Estrée, "Les Origines de la Revue au théâtre"; Robert Dreyfus, Petite histoire de la revue de fin d'année; Hodgart, 204-207; and the articles by Lyonnet on "La Revue de fin d'année il y a cent ans" and "La Revue de fin d'année sous le Premier Empire".
9. In Le Voltaire, 17 February 1880.
10. Peter, Le Théâtre & la vie, 2, 295.
11. L. François, "Critique dramatique", R.A.D., 32: 298, 1893.
12. In Le Bien public, 22 January 1877.

THEODORE DE BANVILLE (1823-1891)

Théodore Faullain de Banville was known chiefly as a poet, one of the pillars of the Parnassian school, but he also wrote a considerable quantity of journalistic pieces, some fiction and a number of works in dramatic form.

His first play (and one of the most interesting in some respects) was Le Feuilletton d'Aristophane, written in collaboration with Philoxène Boyer and produced in 1852. More than half his dramatic works were written too early for inclusion here, including some of the better ones: Le Beau Léandre (1856), Les Fourberies de Nérine (1864) and Gringoire (1866), perhaps the best known. Even of the seven plays written after the Franco-Prussian war,<sup>1</sup> some are irrelevant to the present purpose. Déïdamia (Odéon, 1876) was a comédie héroïque, and, though it was described simply as a comédie en vers, so in effect was La Perle (Théâtre-Italien, 1877),<sup>2</sup> which are thus outside our terms of reference, as are Le Forgeron, written in 1887, and Esope of 1890, which were scarcely more comic and furthermore do not appear to have been staged, at least during the material period.

Three plays remain which were more or less comic and which were actually produced in Paris between 1871 and 1900: Riquet à la Houppe, a comédie féerique in four acts, published in 1884 but first produced at the Bodinière only in June 1896, after Banville's death<sup>3</sup>; the one-act comedy Socrate et sa femme, presented at the Comédie-Française on 2 December 1885<sup>4</sup>; and Le Baiser, another one-act comedy, originally created by the Théâtre-Libre on 23 December 1887 and revived at the Théâtre-Français on 14 April the follow-

ing year. All three were in verse, as indeed were all Banville's dramas except Gringoire.

In fact, the use of verse was a logical, almost necessary consequence of Banville's conception of drama. Basing his reasoning on the history of the European theatre, he argued that drama is simply a branch of poetry: specifically, "la Comédie est directement née de l'Ode".<sup>5</sup> He maintained that as the theatre had become cut off from its sustaining roots in poetry it had degenerated, either into loquacious abstractions, as in the eighteenth century, or else into the sterile heresy of realism. What was needed, then, was that poetry and drama should be reunited. He believed that this had actually been done for tragedy by Victor Hugo, so he himself would concentrate on comedy.<sup>6</sup>

Hugo was one of the main inspirations of Banville's drama, and his other principal models were Shakespeare, the old tradition of fabliau and farce, the neo-classical drama of the seventeenth century and the Italian comedy. It is sometimes suggested that Banville's comedies were like those of Musset,<sup>7</sup> but the resemblance seems only general. They were similar to the extent that some of their plays were closet drama rather than practical theatre pieces (and this was truer, if anything, of Banville than of the creator of un spectacle dans un fauteuil); that poetic fancy was allowed a prominent place in the work of each; and that both were preoccupied with love almost to the exclusion of other subjects. Their dissimilarities, though, seem altogether more significant. The emotion which characterizes much of Musset's theatre is singularly absent from Banville's passionless plays, and Banville's work is quite devoid of

Musset's psychological penetration.

It is notable that Banville looked to the past for all his dramatic models except Hugo. Alvin Harms' mild observation that "In some ways Banville's theater is almost an anachronism in the nineteenth century",<sup>8</sup> is unlikely to provoke disagreement. In a foreword to Riquet à la Houppe, the playwright assured the reader that in all his works he had tried to be "autant que possible vivant, sincère et moderne", but it is difficult to understand what he considered modern in his writing. Some features of his versification, perhaps, but otherwise there is a striking avoidance of the specifically modern both in the techniques and the subjects of his plays.

In their settings, for example, he was positively in flight from the contemporary scene, taking refuge now in classical antiquity, now in an idealized France of the Renaissance or of the seventeenth century, now out of the sublunary world altogether, in Olympus or the land of faery. Apart from Le Feuilletton d'Aristophane, a sort of revue which imagined Aristophanes transported to the Paris of the Fifties, the only play ostensibly set in contemporary France was Le Baiser: "La scène est dans les bois de Viroflay. De nos jours." Yet its dramatis personae, Pierrot and the Fairy Urgèle, establish its true location in the realms of intemporal fancy, returning to the here and now only intermittently and for comic effect.

Banville's choice of settings was symptomatic of a more fundamental evasion of present reality. In Le Théâtre des poètes, Jacques Ernest-Charles wrote of him:

On dirait qu'il ne voit pas son époque. En tout cas, il la voit distraitement, il ne

l'observe pas.<sup>9</sup>

If he did not see, perhaps it was that he did not choose to see industrial squalor, partisan meannesses, social divisions and the other unlovely facts of life. Staunchly committed to a rather trite and rudimentary conception of beauty which could not comfortably accommodate the physical and moral ugliness of much of the modern world, Banville substituted an artificial construct for reality. In Les Contemporains, Jules Lemaître described him as one

qui se promène dans la vie comme dans un rêve  
magnifique, et à qui la réalité, même  
contemporaine, n'apparaît qu'à travers des  
souvenirs de mythologie, des voiles éclatants  
et transparents qui la colorent et l'agrandis-  
sent.<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly, a number of Banville's contemporaries found his private, escapist vision irrelevant to their own concerns and experience. In 1887, Jules Tellier demanded:

Mais qu'a de commun avec nous M. de Banville?  
Il n'a rien senti de nos inquiétudes et rien  
connu de nos maux. Notre âme lui est restée  
étrangère.<sup>11</sup>

The plays reflect little of the history or the outlook of the times in which they were written. Although he often made brief topical allusions in his comedies, these remained at an entirely superficial, decorative level; as, for example, when Pierrot, in Le Baiser, expressed the idea of longevity by the phrase

Voir des jours plus qu'en a vu monsieur  
Chevreul.<sup>12</sup>

The venerable chemist was pressed into service here for no deeper reason than that an audience would be familiar with his name and aware that he was well into his nineties; and to furnish an unforeseen rhyme for tilleul, of course. It is postiche modernity.

Banville made more substantial references to current events and preoccupations only rarely and obliquely. One such instance is the tirade rather awkwardly dragged into the third scene of Socrate et sa femme. Ostensibly Socrates' reaction to the defeat of Athens by Sparta, it was really Banville's patriotic exhortation to the French following the war of 1870.

Such moments were few in his theatre, however. As well as his wilful blindness to the present, his loyalty to the doctrine of l'art pour l'art normally ruled out any sort of didacticism (unless it was to plead the cause of art itself, as in Socrates' speech). In Ernest-Charles's colourful words:

Ce ténor effréné a du moins l'esprit de ne jamais se servir de sa lyre pour frapper à bras raccourcis sur ses contemporains. (...) Il n'est pas homme à réformer, de force ou de gré. Il n'a d'ailleurs pas beaucoup d'idées. Il n'a même pas d'idées du tout.<sup>13</sup>

The parting shot may seem cruel, but though Ernest-Charles was generally critical of Banville's plays, on this point he is of the majority opinion.<sup>14</sup> Banville's ideas were confined to a tireless and enthusiastic, but vaguely conceived devotion to France, art, duty, beauty, love and what he called l'idéal, a concept never really explained but constantly invoked. These were an uncontroversial set of values and what the playwright had to say about them was usually commonplace.

His imagination was not very fertile in the invention of plots, either. Indeed, one of the most singular things about his theatre, viewed as a whole, was his tendency to repeat himself. It is not just that nearly all his plays were about love (one might say much the same of Marivaux,



for instance) but that the same situations and developments kept recurring. Underlying his plays we can discern a small number of characteristic myths to which he constantly resorted. The most pervasive of all was that an ugly body might hide a beautiful soul, an idea incarnated in a number of Banville's heroes: Gringoire, Socrates, Aesop, Vulcan (in Le Forgeron) and Riquet de la Houppes, the most deformed of all. One can appreciate the particular appeal this idea, with its consoling system of compensations, would have for such a Pollyanna among playwrights, who could no more envisage total ugliness than total evil. It is typical of his benign world-view that even ugliness should prove beautiful when looked at aright.

A second recurrent motif was that words have the power to win love. This idea is closely associated with the first one, for the soul can sometimes reveal its unexpected beauty through beautiful speech. It was through their words that Gringoire and Riquet won the women they loved and Socrates disarmed the hostile Myrrhine (and even Xantippe herself, for a moment). The notion has had a certain popularity among poets.

The third topos is that of transformation, or restoration, through love. This is a very common element in fairy tales (Beauty and the Beast, the Frog Prince, Snow White, the Sleeping Beauty and so on), so it was especially appropriate to Banville's two fairy comedies. In Riquet à la Houppes there was a double transfiguration: Riquet and Rose were each made whole by the other's love. In Le Baiser the Fairy Urgèle was released from an evil spell by Pierrot's kiss, which, incidentally, simultaneously transformed the

prudish innocent into an importunate womanizer:

Mon innocence enfin commence à me peser,  
Et, pour être Pierrot, je n'en suis pas  
moins homme (18).

The contrast between the two transformations made the figure particularly effective in this case and the playwright made good use of its comic potential.

Ludicrous as Pierrot's sudden amorous appetite may be in its clumsy candour, it is no paradox to maintain that it is actually one of the more interesting depictions of love in Banville's theatre. For although he wrote about love constantly, he did not usually write about it well. We know that Riquet is in love with Rose, just as we know him to be a prince and valiant in battle, because we are told so and nothing in his demeanour positively belies the claim. Yet in all his outpouring of words about love, the talk of fièvre and chaînes, the authentic insight which convinces is missing. Nothing makes clearer Banville's difference from Musset than the general, abstract way he writes about love.<sup>15</sup> Even the indulgent John Charpentier acknowledged:

Sa fantaisie est plus idéale ou idéologique;  
elle est moins humaine en ce qu'elle ne suit  
pas de près les mouvements du coeur, ne  
participe pas d'une constante et subtile  
analyse des sentiments.<sup>16</sup>

The same lack of interest, or perhaps of skill, in analysing the psychology of concrete individuals also affects Banville's character drawing. His task was probably made harder by his systematic optimism, since he had to deal mostly with good people, who are notoriously more difficult to make convincing and interesting to the general public.

Whatever the reason, his Socrates was extremely bland. As Jules Lemaître was quick to point out,<sup>17</sup> he bore no resemblance to the historical Socrates. In fact he was

fashioned more or less in the image of his creator, a sort of Pangloss, who loved his Xantippe:

Car son utile rage était le fouet têtue  
Dont la rude lanière, éveillant ma vertu,  
Comme l'âne fouaillé par le vieillard Silène,  
Tenait ma patience et ma force en haleine. (viii)

It was inevitable that Banville's Xantippe should turn out to have virtues, but she also had bad qualities which made her a little more interesting than her beatific husband.

In Riquet à la Houppe, Rose and Riquet were both somewhat colourless characters. This was an unfortunate defect in the play's principals, but what was worse, the plot required both to appear exceptional at a given moment. In Act II, scene iii, Riquet had to speak to Rose with such hypnotic eloquence as to transform her child-like stupidity into brilliant intelligence. The lines Banville gave him do not convince us as cogent enough to have done this without fairy intervention.

In the other instance, Rose had to demonstrate her amazing intelligence. This was no easy task for the playwright, whose solution was to show her in rapid succession: 1) suddenly literate; 2) administering a fluent but indifferently mordant rebuke to Luciole; and 3) giving a virtuoso performance on the lute. It was an engagingly facile depiction of brilliance, but it is uncertain how much of its humour was intentional.

What saved Riquet à la Houppe was some of its minor characters. In Clair de Lune, there was just a trace of Musset's airy fantasy, or even the faintest echo of certain Shakespearean clowns, as in his ironical acceptance of Riquet's purse in Act II, scene iv.

Luciole (whose name, like that of Clair de Lune, seems to belong with Cobweb, Moth and Mustard-Seed) was colourful

and comic by virtue of his swagger, his naïve vanity and the ringing hyperbole of his speech.

King Myrtil was defined and made interesting by his three obsessions: first, his comic poverty (which made him resemble no-one so much as the Baron Stonybroke of English pantomime); second, his unmarriageable daughter; and third, his fastidious horror at the undisciplined luxuriance of the garden. The last trait was particularly appealing and convincing because it was so gratuitous a touch.

The Fairy Urgèle in Le Baiser was a marked advance on her insipid cousins Diamant and Cyprine. The role began dully enough, with her speech and demeanour showing a staid quality that Banville perhaps thought appropriate to her status, first as a worthy old woman, then as an immortal. But from the point where Pierrot began demanding his reward, she became distinctly sprightlier. Her language became more colourful, her rhymes bolder, and she showed a certain amount of ironical wit, making her a fit partner for Pierrot.

Le Baiser was Pierrot's play, however, and the role must have offered plenty of comic opportunities for actors as skilled as Antoine and Coquelin cadet. Of course, the role owed a good deal to previous Pierrots. The naïve, good-natured clown of the first part, the shrewd, quick worldling of the middle section, and the deserted lover, ruefully joking about hanging himself, all had their antecedents in the traditions of the role.

It is understandable that Banville, who was unwilling to look steadily upon real life or the living should in the main have created unlikelike characters. In Charpentier's charming words, "Ils n'appartiennent pas à la vie: ils y font

seulement allusion.<sup>18</sup> It is consequent also that in general he should have succeeded best with ready-made literary types - Pierrot, Nérine, Scapin, Géronte, Léandre - whose artificiality was unequivocal.

Eschewing contemporary reality in his own work, Banville naturally rejected realism in art as an ugly aberration. Much of his interest for the theatrical historian comes from the fact that at a time when the tide of realism was rising in the French theatre, he remained a steadfast champion of artificiality. This might be seen in his loyalty to verse drama, for while he felt most at home and at his best in verse, its use was also a conscious affirmation of his independence from current practices, as witness his appeal to the audience, in the closing lines of Le Baiser, to applaud the actors and the poet:

... Pour faire une niche aux préjugés étroits,  
 (...) nous absolvant tous trois  
 De n'avoir pas conté cette blquette en prose.

Others might be growing uneasy about unrealistic stage conventions, too, but Banville continued to employ the aside and the soliloquy freely and with tranquil assurance. In fact, the foreword to Riquet à la Houppe stated that part of his reason for writing the play was to "rendre à la Comédie les monologues en strophes lyriques et les scènes dialoguées symétriquement".

He revived the anti-illusionist practice of allowing one of the characters to step "out of the play" to address the public directly in an epilogue or compliment. This was done, for example, in Riquet à la Houppe, which ended with a ballade commending the play to the audience's applause.

The closing moments of Le Baiser were particularly

interesting. The action proper ended on a long soliloquy by Pierrot, deserted by Urgèle; but at a certain point the nature of his speech changed, to furnish as nice an instance of "self-conscious stage" as one could wish for:

- Encore un mot, et j'ai fini.  
 La Fée est envolée au fond du ciel béni;  
 Mais nous ressuscitons une ancienne coutume,  
 Et l'actrice, qui n'a pas quitté son costume,  
 Veut revenir, le coeur plein d'un espoir gourmand,  
 Tresser, en douze vers, son petit compliment.  
 Donc, s'il vous plaît, avant que son fard ne pâlisce,  
 Je m'en vais la chercher, ici, dans la coulisse.  
 (Il va vers la coulisse, et parle à Urgèle,  
qu'on ne voit pas.)  
 Venez (33).

Whereupon Urgèle (or was she now really Mlle Deneuilly?) delivered her compliment to the ladies of Paris.<sup>19</sup>

There are reasons, then, for making a place for Banville and his scant baggage of three little comedies, in a study of French comic drama of this period. Without him, a tint would be missing from the picture, one variety of the theatrical taste of the time, albeit a minority one, would be unrepresented.

Besides, in spite of his defects as a dramatist, Banville's influence was important. Today, no doubt, we should not estimate the importance of that influence as highly as Ernest-Charles did when he wrote in 1910:

Qui l'eût dit, quand il écrivait ses pièces  
 avenantes, qu'un jour Banville aurait autant  
 de disciples qu'il avait de maîtres? (...)  
 L'influence de Banville sur les poètes  
 d'aujourd'hui est universelle, est énorme, est  
 écrasante.<sup>20</sup>

We tend not to count the numerous lesser beneficiaries of Banville's example, such as Docquois or Marsolleau, still less Artus or Palefroï, who have been winnowed away by time. Nevertheless, we do recognize his palpable influence on much more important playwrights such as Rostand.<sup>21</sup>

Que peut-il rester d'un théâtre dans lequel on ne rencontre ni action dramatique, ni idées, ni caractères, ni types?<sup>22</sup>

asked Morlot pertinently after Banville's death. His chief legacy seems to have been his style of comic verse. He had developed the main features of his characteristic technique by the time the Odes funambulesques were published in 1857, but the early comedies derived their humour less from the form of the lines than from their content: irony, witty rejoinders, incongruities, hyperbole, periphrasis and the like. Perhaps Ernest-Charles was exaggerating a little for the sake of a neat paradox when he observed that

Banville, prodigue de vers comiques dans ses odes, en est avare dans ses comédies. Il ne consent au vers comique que dans le Baiser,<sup>23</sup>

but it was in that comedy that Banville's comedy style reached its peak of elaboration.

Its main feature was its rhymes. Once discerned by the audience, a rhyme scheme creates expectations, and Banville's rhymes aimed at comic effect by providing what was expected in an unexpected way. One device was to replace hackneyed couplings (of the fuite/poursuite and coeur/vainqueur type) by what might be called "nonce rhymes" or unique pairings of words. As Hugo in particular had shown, proper names were useful for this purpose, producing unpredictable rhymes like the Chevreur/tilleul example noted above and:

Pierrot. - Nous voyagerons, mais pas plus loin que Senlis.

Urgèle. - Et nous serons très blancs, près des touffes de lys (24).

There were also "morganatic rhymes", so to speak, where one term of the rhyme was a word usually denied such prominence by its grammatical function: an article, prepos-

ition, possessive adjective, atonic pronoun or such. Banville made occasional use of this, as in:

Urgèle. - Oui, le prodige si follement amer, si  
Cruel, n'existe plus, et je te dis  
merci. (16)

And again:

Pierrot.- Oh! comme tu fis bien d'avoir demandé mon  
Baiser! Dis-moi, qui donc es-tu, joli  
démon? (15)

Banville's most characteristic trick, however, was the ultra-rich rhyme, the rime-calembour. In this, some unpromising polysyllable was found its perfect homophonous match, preferably as far-fetched and ingeniously composite as possible. The two previous quotations were minor examples of this, but the locus classicus is Pierrot's couplet:

La dette est claire. Elle eût semblé évidente  
Au siècle qui chanta Béatrice - et vit Dante! (16)

though a similar tour de force occurred in Urgèle's lines:

Pas pour moi. Si j'ai pu flirter incidemment,  
Urgèle, qui jamais ne parle ainsi d'amant ... (21)

Though his verse was the single most important element in Banville's comic technique, it was not his only resource. Ernest-Charles, for example, held that ingenious circumlocution was part of the essence of the Banvillesque, and that in this respect, "Banville, lui, est banvillesque presque autant que personne au monde."<sup>24</sup> Many others thought that larding the dialogue with literary reminiscences was characteristic of the Banville manner. This habit of his reminds us that Banville's comedies were addressed to a lettered elite. Although he made use of broad comic effects accessible to anyone, others assumed a relatively sophisticated, well-read public, who knew their classics and could spot an allusion on the wing. It was his beloved Corneille,



whose presence permeates the comedies, who was most often quoted, imitated or affectionately pastiched in this way, but Le Baiser, for instance, offered sly references to authors as diverse as Poe ("Nevermore!") and Molière:

Urgèle. - Ah! tout beau! Que fait là votre main?

Pierrot. - Je tâte votre habit, l'étoffe en est...(18)

It was through his comic techniques that Banville was to have most influence on his successors, some of whom, having more wit, discretion and taste, used them better. When, in Act I, scene iii of Donnay's Lysistrata, the languishing Lampito exclaimed

Ce n'est plus une ardeur cachée dans mon âme,  
c'est Cypris tout entière attachée à son proie,  
comme disent les tragiques,

the joke was purest Banville, and a comedy like Rostand's Deux Pierrots was almost too indebted to Le Baiser in virtually every respect. Above all, it was Banville's style (not Bergerat's, for example) which became the model for verse comedy, and one is inclined to agree, on the whole, with Morlot's seemingly severe valediction:

Poète d'agréable inspiration et maniant  
merveilleusement la rime, M. de Banville sut  
racheter par le tour curieux de son langage  
l'inanité de ses conceptions dramatiques.<sup>25</sup>

Banville: Footnotes

1. This does not include other stage works such as verse prologues or lyric pieces like Adieu and Hymnis.
2. Wicks gave the title as La Perle de Cléopâtre. Morlot wrote of this play: "L'amour d'Antoine et de Cléopâtre est un thème bien grave pour un poète fantaisiste qui ne veut pas rester dans la note légère: le lyrisme à son tour succombe sous le drame." ("Un fantaisiste dramatique", 32).
3. Partly inspired by Perrault's story.
4. In an article in R.H.L.F., 20, in 1913, Berthet sought to suggest that Banville's play might have been partly inspired by La Maison de Socrate le Sage, an unacted play of 1809, attributed to Louis-Sébastien Mercier. The arguments adduced were not overwhelming.
5. Foreword to Comédies, Lemerre, 1892.
6. "Beginning with Le Feuilletton d'Aristophane of 1852, Banville published some seventeen plays. Except for Le Forgeron, the title of each one is followed by a designation containing the word comédie or comique." (Harms, 111)
7. For example by Harms, 112.
8. Ibid.
9. Le Théâtre des poètes, 27.
10. Les Contemporains, 1, 29.
11. "M. Théodore de Banville et sa dernière oeuvre dramatique", 57.
12. Since Le Baiser is not divided into scenes, the references given are to page numbers in the original edition (Paris, Charpentier, 1888).
13. Ernest-Charles, loc. cit.
14. "Quelque Sully-Prudhommien intransigeant notera ingénieusement qu'il n'y a pas une idée dans tous ces vers." (Tellier, 66)
15. It is true that Daudet found Banville's love-scenes convincing: "Par moments quel souffle passionné, quels beaux emportements d'amour!" (Pages inédites, 305). As a reviewer, Daudet was often generous to a fault.
16. Théodore de Banville, 161.
17. Lemaître, op. cit.
18. Charpentier, op. cit., 163.

19. Banville thoughtfully provided an alternative version for provincial performances.
20. Ernest-Charles, op. cit., 19.
21. It could be of interest to investigate how Banville's play was related to Dowson's The Pierrot of the Minute (1897), a sort of Le Baiser in a minor key.
22. Morlot, op. cit., 34.
23. Ernest-Charles, op. cit., 41.
24. Ernest-Charles, op. cit., 37.
25. Morlot, op. cit., 36.

HENRY MEILHAC (1831-1897) AND LUDOVIC HALEVY (1834-1908)<sup>1</sup>

The names of Henry Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy are so closely associated with that of Jacques Offenbach, and the trio seem so entirely the epitome of Second Empire gaiety, that the non-specialist might be surprized to realize that over half the playwrights' work was actually written under the Third Republic. If they are remembered at all today, it may be as the authors of Froufrou (1869), but more likely as the librettists of La Belle Hélène, La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein, La Périchole and La Vie parisienne. It is fitting that their connection with at least the last-named classic of opéra-bouffe should be remembered, because they were among the principal inventors of a certain vie parisienne.

However, between 1871 and 1881, Meilhac and Halévy collaborated on no less than twenty-seven further works for the stage. Five of these are not to the present purpose as they were lyric works: the libretto for Bizet's Carmen (Opéra-Comique, 3 March 1875); their last opéra-bouffe with Offenbach, La Boulangère a des écus (Variétés, 5 August 1875); and three opéras-comiques in three acts for Lecocq, all staged at his favourite theatre, the Renaissance: Le Petit duc (25 January 1878), La Petite Mademoiselle (12 April 1879), and the disappointing Janot (22 January 1881). Also irrelevant here is the ballet they wrote with Louis Mérante, to music by Gaston Salvayre, Fandango (Opéra, 26 November 1877).

Two one-act comedies written for the Variétés can also be dealt with quite perfunctorily. Although Madame attend Monsieur (8 February 1872) and Toto chez Tata (25 August 1873) were evidently highly regarded by contemporary audiences, their only interest today is as historical curiosities, par-

ticularly pure specimens of the bespoke star vehicle. They were practically monologues, bravura pieces for Céline Chaumont, first as a wronged and comically avenging wife, and second in the travesti role of the schoolboy Toto.<sup>2</sup> Like Labiche, Rostand, Feydeau and the majority of contemporary playwrights, Meilhac and Halévy often wrote with particular players in view,<sup>3</sup> but none of their other plays were quite so blatantly designed purely as showcases for a specific solo performer.

The remainder were very diverse productions - plays in one, three or four acts, some fairly realistic and others highly stylized, ranging in genre from wild vaudevilles to light comedy. Because of this variety, there is hardly a generalization one can make about the subjects, tone, genre or dramaturgy of their work which is not belied by some exception. Having said that they did not write tragedies, verse plays or historical drama (at least during this period), the range of absolute statements possible about their theatre is more or less exhausted, notwithstanding the fact that critics have often seemed to imply that there was a single Meilhac and Halévy manner.

It has sometimes been flatly stated, for instance, that their work lacked any emotional warmth: "Pas un mot de sensibilité naïve",<sup>4</sup> as Parigot put it; but if the observation has a certain validity in general, it is not completely true. Certain of their plays had a distinctly sentimental tinge: L'Eté de la Saint-Martin (Théâtre-Français, 1 July 1873), Toto chez Tata, and L'Ingénue (Variétés, 24 September 1874) are obvious examples; and even in plays as late as Lolotte (Vaudeville, 4 October 1879) and La Petite mère (later

retitled Brigitte, Variétés, 6 March 1880) there were moments when sensibility of a sort made itself felt.<sup>5</sup>

Meilhac and Halévy are also often associated with the depiction of Parisian life. This is perfectly justified, of course, but should not be taken to imply that their scope was restricted to this subject. Fully a third of the comedies under consideration were set wholly or partly outside Paris, and this served a definite purpose.

Mild satire of provincials as such was a feature of Le Réveillon (Palais-Royal, 10 September 1872),<sup>6</sup> of Le Prince (Palais-Royal, 25 November 1876) and La Petite mère, and Act I of this last play introduced peasants to humorous effect, as did the second act of La Petite marquise (Variétés, 13 February 1874), in which the relationship between Boisgommeux, Martine and Georgette was strongly reminiscent of Dom Juan with Charlotte and Mathurine.

In accordance with convention, they usually showed country life as simpler and more innocent than that of the city. It was probably no coincidence that some of their more sentimental plays, such as the benign bluette L'Eté de la Saint-Martin and the Pailleronesque L'Ingénue, were set in tranquil châteaux. Conversely the cocotte, epitome of corruption, was naturally confined to the Parisian scene, except where the authors were making a specific point of the intoxicating effects of sophisticated urban ways on simple provincials, as in Le Réveillon and Le Prince.

It was in the second, Parisian act of La Petite mère that Henriette's elopement and Valentin's entanglements with cocottes and married women showed that Brigitte's control over her charges was slipping, and she herself attributed this to

the environment, in words delightful for their unconscious irony:

Là-bas, à la campagne, ça allait encore, j'étais de force... mais ici, en présence d'une civilisation supérieure... je ne peux pas, je ne peux pas, je ne peux pas! (II, xv)

Was it no more than chance that the third act, where the little family's values returned to an even keel, was set away from the hurly-burly of the city, in the Château des Moulineaux, near Fontainebleau?

Meilhac and Halévy are also reputed to be chroniclers of the life of the upper classes, and again this is true within limits. While their dramatis personae generally reflected a préjugé nobiliaire as marked as that of a Feuillet or a Pailleron, taken all together their plays touched on almost every class of society. The middle classes, both provincial and Parisian, were just as widely represented in their work. Though the odd aristocrat might make an appearance in them, comedies like Le Roi Candaule, La Boule and Loulou were basically plays of bourgeois life. As has been seen above, peasants appeared in some plays, and the urban proletariat was also shown, and not always in minor supporting roles. Mitaine, one of the leading characters in the folie-vaudeville La Mi-Carême (Palais-Royal, 2 April 1874) was that rara avis a sympathetic concierge, and servants were the principals in the one act comedy Les Sonnettes, staged at the Variétés on 15 November 1872, in which it was the Marquise de Château-Lansac who had the non-speaking walk-on role.

Certain of the plays gave glimpses of other occupations. The operations of shady businessmen were shown in Tricoche et Cacolet and in La Roussotte, and the latter also showed the daily life of a little Parisian crémèrie; the separation

hearing in the third act of La Boule introduced the personnel and procedures of the law-courts; painters and forains lent a picturesque touch to La Cigale; and theatricals appeared in a number of works, including La Boule, Le Prince and Le Mari de la débutante.

So far from being narrowly specialized in the portrayal of smart society, then, Meilhac and Halévy treated as wide a variety of milieux as any playwright of the time. Furthermore, if their observation of the contemporary scene was not penetrating, it was accurate. They had keen eyes and ears for registering the surfaces of the life around them. Jules Lemaître wrote of their work:

On y trouvera, plus exactement et plus agréablement qu'ailleurs, les mœurs et comportements, les tics, le langage et le tour d'esprit des personnes frivoles et élégants du Second Empire et du commencement de la troisième République. <sup>7</sup>

He considered that, despite a strong element of fantasy, "C'était, dans le fond, un théâtre réaliste", <sup>8</sup> and his opinion was shared by Zola, who might be accounted something of an expert in such matters. Zola particularly liked their imaginative choice of unusual, interesting and authentic locations for their scenes, like the moonlit square in Saint-Malo in Act II of Le Prince, with the sounds of revelry bringing protesting citizens to their windows and the pastry-cooks scurrying to the Café de la Comédie with their wares. One may imagine that it was the champion of the Impressionists as well as the advocate of stage realism who was enchanted by the first scene in La Cigale:

Quel adorable tableau que le premier acte, cette auberge de Barbizon, dont le décor reproduit exactement les moindres détails; <sup>9</sup>

the second-act setting was "encore une merveille, ce chalet de



Bougival", and the studio of the "Intentionist" painter Marignan in the last act delighted him too.

The authors' familiarity and fascination with the daily life of the theatre prompted some of their more interesting settings: a stage seen from the rear during a performance in Le Mari de la débutante, a stage-doorkeeper's box in La Boule and, most novel of all, the familiar curved corridor outside the baignoires de face of a theatre in Le Roi Candaule. Such scenes were full of authentic detail behind the fantasy of the main action.

For, after all, it is obvious that fantasy and improbability were also major ingredients in Meilhac and Halévy's theatre; and in calling it basically realistic, Lemaître never intended to deny its unrealistic aspects. He himself acknowledged: "C'est devenu un lieu commun, de dire que la marque de Meilhac est un indéfinissable mélange de fantaisie et de vérité."<sup>10</sup> The relative dosage of the two qualities varied considerably from play to play. Works like La Veuve, let us say, were comparatively realistic, while the vaudevilles were compounded of wild imaginings and stage conventions: there was not the slightest trace of observation in Tricoche et Cacolet (Palais-Royal, 6 December 1871), and Loulou (Palais-Royal, 31 March 1876) was pure stage convention, retribution farce at its most mechanical.

Notwithstanding the realistic element in their plays, Meilhac and Halévy made free use of the artificial stage conventions of their day. Asides and soliloquies abounded in their dialogue, and their plots employed the same devices and mechanisms as those of Scribe or Sardou. However, they did not always use them "seriously", so to speak, hoping for a

suspension of the spectator's disbelief. Zola seems to have considered that their work often consisted of realistic tableaux linked in a merely formal manner by conventional ficelles to which the playwrights attached no importance.

More perceptively, Lemaître saw that their disavowal of convention often went further than that, and that Meilhac, in particular perhaps, deliberately undercut the very conventions he was using:

Son moyen de sacrifier le moins possible à la convention, c'est de la confesser, en la raillant un peu. Il ne s'en fait jamais accroire. <sup>11</sup>

In other words, their use of conventional stage devices was not simply compliance, even in a spirit of indifference, but a sly, metatheatrical irony by which the theatre unmasked its own artificiality. In essence, this was not very different from Jarry's anti-illusionist theatricalism.<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes, it was the unreality of traditional stage technique which was mocked, one of the most blatant examples occurring in Act II, scene x of Le Réveillon. In the course of the supper-party, conversation turned to why supper-parties were never successfully shown on stage. Various reasons were advanced, and finally:

Métella. -Une autre raison qui fait qu'un souper au théâtre ne peut jamais ressembler à un vrai souper, c'est qu'au théâtre on parle les uns après les autres.

Adèle. -Tandis que, dans un vrai souper...

(Tous en même temps, avec des rires et des éclats de voix, se mettent à parler bruyamment. - Brouhaha de quelques instants),

after which, inevitably, the characters went back to talking "les uns après les autres."<sup>13</sup>

As well as conventions of technique, conventional dramatic situations were often satirized. Meilhac and Halévy actually

made little use of the inadvertent quiproquo which was so common in the comic technique of their contemporaries, but they employed deliberate disguise quite often, most amusingly of all, perhaps, in Escouloubine's impersonations in Le Prince, which were made so obviously artificial that they were seen as such by those they were intended to deceive.

The convention that stage disguises were usually successful at least for a while was twitted once again in L'Ingénue. Complying with a traditional plot-cliché, Hector had assumed the identity of an employee of the woman he secretly loved. Against all common probability, he carried off his unconvincing masquerade until Adèle arrived and saw what was plain for all to see:

Un précepteur saurait au moins quelques petites choses... vous ne savez rien, vous, vous ne savez rien du tout! Vous êtes un homme du monde... <sup>14</sup>

In L'Eté de la Saint-Martin, Adrienne's true identity was not formally revealed until scene xv, but the clues planted by the authors were so many and so glaring that it is plain that they were not bent on springing a surprise on the spectators so much as inviting them to recognize a familiar stage artifice in a spirit of ironical complicity.

Much broader comedy, the vaudeville Tricoche et Cacolet might be seen as a caricature of two conventions of the Scribean stage: the disguise and the letter. In the course of the action, the infinitely devious Tricoche and Cacolet incessantly, routinely and (most important of all) very often gratuitously donned a succession of stereotyped disguises: as a stock Jewish moneylender, for instance, a stage Englishman, a Charlet-type old soldier, or an old man à la Daumier. For good measure, Emile and Bernardine exchanged places with

Hippolyte and Virginie, and so spent half the play unconvincingly impersonating domestics. The parodic effect was here achieved quite simply by taking the traditional device of impersonation to ludicrous excess.

Grotesque exaggeration was also the means whereby the play made fun of the common abuse of letters as a plot device in the plays of Scribe's heirs. In Act I scene xii, the scène à faire between wife, husband and lover was incessantly interrupted by the arrival and despatch of letters, eventually many of them from one of the characters on stage to another, who would read them aloud in a stagy aside. The height of the ridiculous was reached when dialogue ceased as all three sat around the same table scribbling notes with squeaky quills.

Among other dramatic commonplaces guyed by Meilhac and Halévy, the outworn New Comedy artifice of the long-lost child was blandly trotted out in La Cigale and La Roussotte. In the latter play, a three-act comédie-vaudeville staged at the Variétés on 28 January 1881, there was a traditional recognition scene lacking none of the classic elements: long-lost son, croix de ma mère, faint childhood recollections, "Mon fils!", tableau. But the authors' parodic intent was made plain by the cavalier brusqueness of the revelation in the closing minutes of the plot, and by the burlesque touch that in the event the piously cherished recognition token was a baccara chip.

In short Meilhac and Halévy did use the current conventions of dramatic technique and plot-making, but not always in good faith, as it were. Exaggeration and burlesque were their main means for dissociating themselves from the conventional devices

that they employed.

The discussion of reality and artificiality in Meilhac and Halévy's dramaturgy seems an appropriate context in which to touch also on their use of music, which was at times "realistic" and at others pure convention. Music was given a fairly prominent place in their comedies, and one might judge them to have been of Beaumarchais's opinion, that without it no entertainment was truly complete. In one way or another, they managed to bring music into many of their comedies and vaudevilles.

In some, the authors made an attempt to offer a credible explanation for introducing music. In La Petite mère, for example, Valentin's profession as a composer allowed the use of music throughout the play. Works with a theatrical setting - Le Roi Candaule, La Boule, Le Mari de la débutante - offered the opportunity of including overtures or vocal numbers from the shows supposedly in progress. In those involving merrymaking, such as Le Réveillon and Le Prince, music for dancing, drinking songs and the like were a natural part of the festive proceedings. In several plays, but particularly in La Veuve, music was brought in as a normal salon pastime in the society of that period. The authors may well have created the rather delightful cameo of Mlle Charentonnay in La Veuve (Gymnase, 5 November 1874) principally for the purpose of providing the music, which was sometimes in the focus of attention and sometimes a mere background to the conversation.

In the latter case, it was in effect musique de scène of "realistic" provenance; but in more stylized works the playwrights would often call for music from a pit orchestra

without troubling to account for it by rationalizations.

There was, for example, atmospheric musique de scène in the stage version and original brochure of Tricoche et Cacolet, though interestingly it was later omitted from the stage-directions of the collected Théâtre (1900-1902).

Tricoche et Cacolet was the first of their works to be staged under the Third Republic; the last, La Roussotte (written in collaboration with Albert Millaud) was in a sense the most artificial of all in its use of music, in that it was an old-fashioned vaudeville à couplets, in which the characters burst unaccountably into song from time to time. There is no reason to suppose, then, that their fondness for including music in their dramatic works or their readiness to employ it as an artificial stage convention were in any way affected by the passage of time or by changing theatrical fashion. Though it seems to have received little critical attention, the use of music should perhaps be recognized as a permanent and fairly important feature of their dramatic technique.

In a very perceptive article published on the occasion of Meilhac's death in 1897, Jules Lemaître stressed the originality of his theatre (including that written in collaboration with Halévy, of course) in the French drama of his time:

Il ne ressemblait en aucune façon à celui de Scribe continué par Sardou, ni à celui d'Augier ou de Dumas fils; mais il ne ressemblait pas non plus à celui de Labiche. <sup>15</sup>

Lemaître had in mind two chief characteristics which set Meilhac's - and Halévy's - theatre apart from that of others: first a distinctive spirit: "Il est profondément et presque universellement sceptique, ironique, irrévérencieux", <sup>16</sup> a light and graceful style of comedy almost as far removed from

Labiche's sturdy humour as it was from the fundamental seriousness of Augier and Dumas, with their artistic pretensions and didacticism.

In the second place, Lemaître was referring to the marked difference in dramatic technique which separated Meilhac and Halévy from the other major dramatists of their time:

Meilhac, parti modestement du vaudeville, à ce qu'il semblait, inventa, presque du premier coup, une comédie moins tendue et moins apprêtée que celle de Dumas ou d'Augier, d'une composition moins artificieuse, d'un style moins livresque, une comédie plus familière, et même plus vraie en dépit des parties bouffonnes. <sup>17</sup>

At a time when the pièce bien faite dominated French dramatic writing, "Il a fondé le théâtre anti-scribiste".<sup>18</sup>

Zola, always anxiously scanning the theatrical horizon for any harbinger of the revolution in drama he desired and expected, had already seized on this aspect of Meilhac and Halévy's work twenty years previously. Reviewing La Cigale for Le Bien public on 15 October 1877, he had noted (and it was with approval):

Jamais l'insouciance des deux écrivains n'est allée plus loin à l'égard de l'intrigue, de la carcasse plus ou moins solide d'un ouvrage. C'est de la science dramatique va comme je te pousse.

In his review of Le Mari de la débutante in Le Voltaire on 11 February 1879, he outlined more explicitly how their dramaturgy diverged from the received model:

MM. Meilhac et Halévy continuent à s'affranchir du code dramatique, en se moquant parfaitement de toute intrigue suivie et équilibrée. Nous voilà loin des pièces bien écrites de Scribe (...). L'intérêt n'est plus dans le mécanisme ingénieux des divers éléments de la comédie: il est dans la vivacité, dans les peintures fines et vivantes des tableaux traités isolément.

Jules Lemaître arrived at the same conclusion in an

important and delightful article inspired by a revival of Le Réveillon in 1888; that is, at a time when there was lively debate in progress about the idea of a nouveau théâtre.<sup>19</sup>

Reconsidering the sixteen-year-old comedy, he found:

Elle était d'une constitution très particulière, et propre à troubler l'idée qu'on se forme habituellement d'une pièce 'bien faite'.<sup>20</sup>

By way of proof, he demonstrated that the plot could be adequately summarized without the least reference to the events of the second act, "donc il est vain, superflu, postiche, adventice et contingent",<sup>21</sup> yet it was in no way detrimental to the play in performance, because of the inherent interest of its dialogue and the remarkably well-observed rendering of a supper-party. From this he inferred:

On cherche bien loin; mais le voilà, le nouveau théâtre, le théâtre sans ficelles, sans intrigue, sans conventions, sans mots d'auteur, sans rien que le vrai, - le théâtre anti-scribiste, - la vie en tranches! Il est là ce théâtre de demain, autant, Dieu me pardonne! que dans la Parisienne ou dans Sapho.<sup>22</sup>

Edmond Gondinet was virtually the only other major dramatist of the Sixties and Seventies to make extensive use of the composition by tableaux seen in Le Réveillon, La Veuve, La Boule, Le Mari de la débutante and La Cigale, as opposed to the strongly-plotted and linear method of composition developed by Scribe, which had become the norm.

Vaudevilles like Tricoche et Cacolet and Loulou were more conventional, in that they were of the new fast and fantastic type, particularly associated with Labiche, which was generally replacing the more sedate Scribean vaudeville à couplets as the standard form.

In Le Théâtre d'hier, Hippolyte Parigot thought to define Meilhac and Halévy's situation with respect to the comic



theatre of their day by writing: "A la vérité, ils procèdent de Labiche (...); mais ils opèrent sur le domaine de M. Pailleron."<sup>23</sup> What has been said above does not seem to support the view that Meilhac and Halévy's distinctive work was directly derived from Labiche in any worthwhile sense; but Parigot's suggestion that their theatre had features in common with Pailleron's appears to have rather more substance.

It is true that after dealing quite extensively with both theatres in La Vie parisienne au théâtre, Francis de Croisset decided that in the final analysis:

Pailleron est bien différent de Meilhac et Halévy. Pailleron est optimiste et Meilhac est pessimiste. C'est pour cela que Pailleron écrivait des pièces sentimentales et que Meilhac écrivait des pièces gaies. <sup>24</sup>

However, this judgement would seem to refer simply to a difference in general outlook, tone and genre, whereas Parigot's wording leads one to suppose he was thinking rather of a similarity in subject matter, and Croisset would concede this: the very basis of his interest in them was that Meilhac and Halévy and Pailleron alike were dramatists of la vie parisienne, in his sense of the term. In what contemporaries regarded as their most characteristic work, Meilhac and Halévy treated much the same corner of French society as Pailleron. Unlike Labiche, whose comedy focussed on the bourgeoisie, they often took for their subject the upper social classes, and especially that part of them which was Parisian, clubbable and boulevardier.<sup>25</sup> It was this milieu which furnished the characters of comedies like La Petite marquise, L'Ingénue, La Veuve and Le Petit hôtel, and constituted a significant factor in others, such as Tricoche et Cacolet, La Mi-carême and La Petite mère. Pailleron

habitually dealt with the same social stratum, perhaps with rather less comic verve and fantasy, on the whole, though Francis de Croisset considered that his humour was sometimes indebted to their example:

La blague, c'est (...) l'ironie du boulevard et voilà, entre autre choses, ce qu'avait inventé le théâtre de Meilhac et Halévy, et qui ajoute souvent tant de grâce malicieuse aux comédies de Pailleron. <sup>26</sup>

They were also significantly like Pailleron, and just as significantly unlike Labiche, in the importance they attached to women in their theatre. In this respect (as in many another), they seem much more in touch with the spirit of the age than Labiche, who sometimes gives the impression of having retained something of the attitudes of the July Monarchy in his outlook, right through to the Seventies. With Paillerson, Becque, Renard and Feydeau, among others, Meilhac and Halévy bore witness to the gynaecocentric element in French society and culture in the latter part of the century.

It might be seen as symptomatic that the titles of half the comedies Meilhac and Halévy wrote during these ten years adverted to the play's leading female character. They were of all kinds, socially and temperamentally, ranging from cocottes to the severe countess of La Veuve. This moral spectrum was not in fact continuous, incidentally. Despite the playwrights' common reputation for indulgence about sexual misconduct and the non-judgemental way they often presented cocottes, there was an unobtrusive but definite line drawn between them and decent women. The conduct of errant wives like Bernardine Vander Pouf in Tricoche et Cacolet or La Petite marquise may have been highly questionable, but they remained technically chaste at the final curtain.

The women's ages ranged less widely than in Pailleron: few were beyond middle age, except for some supporting roles such as duennas and housekeepers. There was no equivalent in their theatre for the Pailleron grandmother. At the other end of the scale, it has been written that:

L'on voit peu de jeunes filles dans le théâtre de Meilhac et Halévy. Elles se sont toutes réfugiées dans celui de Pailleron. <sup>27</sup>

The obvious exception to this rule was L'Ingénue. Apart from its characteristic tone, this was very like a Pailleron play. In fact, it was very like two specific Pailleron plays. If the eavesdropping incident (doubtless suggested by On ne badine pas avec l'amour) resembled a similar episode in L'Etincelle, the chief event of the plot anticipated La Souris. In both, an unexpected outburst of jealousy from a girl hitherto seen as a child caught the attention of a man previously interested in her older, married kinswoman. Moreover, Adèle was pretty much of the "Pailleron girl" type, a true ingénue in the ways of the world, but alert, self-possessed and forthright. This was, however, the only girl's role of any substance in Meilhac and Halévy's comedies.

Jules Lemaître noted of Meilhac's theatre: "Aucune de ses femmes n'est méchante, ses petites cocottes n'ayant, tout au plus, qu'une malignité de jeunes guenons."<sup>28</sup> The comment was not, perhaps, completely true: at least at the beginning of Le Prince, Mme Cardinet was of much the same harsh and vinegary disposition as the odious Mme Pinglet of L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, for instance. The case was rare, though, and in general there was in Meilhac and Halévy no hint of that misogyny that can sometimes be sensed in Feydeau, and perhaps in Becque and Courteline. If women were often shown dominating

their husbands or their admirers it was frequently less from a propensity to tyranny than because they were genuinely stronger and more intelligent.<sup>29</sup> Clear examples of this may be seen in Loulou, where the wretched Cloridon appeared as a pygmy between the two strong women in his life, and La Petite marquise in which, rash and sentimental as she was, Henriette showed more character than the vacillating and dishonest Max.

The cocotte, who was to assume so important a role in Feydeau's theatre, had already attained the status of a major type in Meilhac and Halévy's Parisian comedies, where they were as many as marquises.<sup>30</sup> Even when they did not appear in person, they were often mentioned in the dialogue: Catarinette in Madame attend Monsieur, Héloïse Tourniquet in Les Sonnettes, Tata Bourguignonne in Toto chez Tata, Marguerite Lamberthier<sup>31</sup> and Bébé Patapouf in La Petite marquise and Nina Pistolet in La Petite mère. Just as frequently, they actually appeared as characters in the action, often in major roles. As in real life, many of them were actresses, to a greater or lesser extent, like Denise and Simone in Le Prince; others, like Adèle in Le Roi Candaule, were simply kept women.

On the whole, those whom the audience had the opportunity to assess at first hand were not too negatively portrayed by the authors. The splendidly-named Fanny Bombance in Tricoche et Cacolet was convincingly greedy, but also easy-going and good-humoured, as were Simone and Denise in Le Prince and Métella and Toto in Le Réveillon. For some reason, it was more often those who were named but not seen who were represented as harpies battenning on weak husbands and inexperienced young men: Catarinette, Tata Bourguignonne and Nina Pistolet, for instance. Even then, the impression given

was generally not of monsters of wickedness and dangerous agents of social corruption, as cocottes had been depicted in much French drama since Dumas fils, Augier and Barrière.<sup>32</sup>

Rather, Jules Lemaître's suggestion that Meilhac and Halévy's cocottes were sometimes actuated by "une malignité de jeunes guenons" seems as apt as it is well-expressed. What is in question here is not the mere mischief of Métella's teasing of Gaillardin or of the tricks Denise and Simone played on Cardinet and Monicot, but something harder and less playful that was occasionally glimpsed. One such occasion was simply a piece of stage business in Act II scene viii of La Boule, when Mariette robbed La Musardière of the money he was holding with icy and hypnotic deliberation:

Elle prend les billets, les compte, tire un petit portefeuille, et, très-lentement, met les huit mille francs dans le petit portefeuille,

a demonstration of coolness which prompted the exchange:

Mme Pichard -Comme ça a été fait, ces huit mille francs!... Ah! je suis obligée de convenir... nous n'étions pas de cette force-là, à l'ancienne Renaissance.

Mariette -Le progrès!... madame Pichard... le progrès!...

(Elle sort)

Mme Pichard (avec fierté) -Mais, nous avons du coeur, nous autres. (Avec mélancholie)  
C'est ce qui fait que je suis portière!...

(II, ix)

There was something of the same quality - comedy with a slightly bitter aftertaste - in the scene xvi of Le Roi Candaule. The reversal of the situation there was genuinely surprising (though patterned after such familiar models as Le Misanthrope, IV, iii and Turcaret, II, iii), because

Adèle's meek, submissive, simple demeanour (vastly more convincing than that of her namesake in Boubouroche II, iv) left the spectator quite unprepared for the quick glint of steel in her assertion of power over Bouscarin. Although her bleating ingenuousness and humility were entirely her own, Adèle was not unlike Antonia in Becque's La Navette, in the amalgam of stupidity, cunning and greed forming the core of her character.

This was not the only point of contact between Meilhac and Halévy's theatre and Becque's: "Entre les auteurs de la Vie parisienne et celui de la Parisienne il n'y a pas un abîme."<sup>33</sup> Yet perhaps Parigot somewhat exaggerated what they had in common. In particular, it is not easy to share his evident belief that Meilhac and Halévy had exercised a pernicious influence on Becque, who had been seduced by their specious example from his true vocation as an observant realist into the artificiality of a sterile irony and a conscious striving after wit.

This seems improbable because, as we shall see, Becque himself thought his irony a very different thing from theirs, and because if he did have a reputation as a wit, he usually eschewed the mot d'auteur as scrupulously as Tristan Bernard would later do. In fact, he had only a moderate liking for Meilhac and Halévy's theatre. In his well-known lecture on Le Théâtre au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, he prefaced his remarks on their work with the caution:

Après Augier, Dumas fils et Sardou, il faut faire une démarcation. Nous tombons dans la production courante; nous sommes chez des artistes doublés de fabricants. <sup>34</sup>

He described their comedies as tinged with vaudeville and

operetta, genres for which he had no great taste or respect. He allowed the celebrated irony of their writing, but parenthetically drew a distinction which contained an evident plea pro domo sua:

L'ironie est très à la mode. On ne veut plus de l'amertume à aucun prix. Autrefois l'amertume était une qualité, une qualité littéraire au moins.

Sainte-Beuve a écrit de l'amertume qu'elle était le sel de la force. De notre temps, avec notre grande école de je-m'en-fichistes, on lui préfère l'ironie qui se moque de tout sans être affectée de rien.<sup>35</sup>

It is true that their irony was not normally the same as his, but Meilhac and Halévy were capable of what it pleased him to call amertume. The outstanding example of this was the fourth act of Le Mari de la débutante, created at the Palais-Royal on 5 February 1879. The first three acts were vaudevillesque in tone and were well-received, with Monbars scoring a considerable personal success as Mondésir; but the final act was so harshly sardonic that the public was disconcerted, and the grating fourth act was dropped. Its tone was such that it might well have been written by Becque himself, in his more broadly satirical vein, or at least by one of his disciples: perhaps Maurice Boniface.

Becque's lecture was also disparaging about their dramatic craftsmanship:

Toutes les pièces de Meilhac et Halévy ont quelque chose d'improvisé et d'inachevé.<sup>36</sup> Ils ne donnent pas le dernier coup; quel que soit le prix de leurs ouvrages, ils ne sont jamais arrivés à l'oeuvre d'art.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps this criticism can be accounted for at least in part by the fact that Becque's conception of play-making was very different from theirs. However advanced he may have been in some respects, in style and in content for instance, dramaturgically he was distinctly more conservative than they

and remained closer to the model of the well-made play. This was one reason, no doubt, why he admired Sardou, and was willing to accord his work the status of art, while denying it to theirs. The very liberties which pleased Zola probably seemed to him like slipshod workmanship.

The dramatic form of their plays was nevertheless to be one of the ways in which Meilhac and Halévy influenced their successors in French comic drama. Vaudeville might develop in the direction pointed by Labiche and Hennequin, into a specialization of the pièce bien faite which was wielded with distinction by Bisson, Gandillot and Feydeau. In comedy proper, however, well before the stage realists mounted their frontal assaults on the well-made formula in the Eighties, Meilhac and Halévy had subverted its artificiality through their irony and parody, and sapped its structural rigour with their looser, episodic constructions,<sup>38</sup> and the example of their theatre had a certain influence. In 1897, it seemed to Jules Lemaître that

Presque tous les nouveaux venus, les Lavedan, les Donnay, les Hermant, les Guinon, procèdent de lui quant à la forme dramatique (dans laquelle, d'ailleurs, il ne leur est point interdit d'introduire de hauts sentiments et une robuste moralité).<sup>39</sup>

Their influence was apparent in other respects, too. Although he patterned his dramatic form more after the example of Hennequin, Feydeau was an avowed disciple of Meilhac, whom he also chose as one of his models when, around 1890-92, he set about revamping his comic technique in order to make a fresh start in his flagging career. It is quite possible that the importance he gave to the cocotte in his comedy owed something to their example, and an attentive reading of his works suggests that he may occasionally have borrowed specific



comic ideas from their theatre. To take just one example, the much-admired incident in Act I scene ii of Le Dindon, when Pontagnac panicked and slipped Lucienne a bribe not to reveal his advances to her to her husband, appears to repeat a moment in La Boule:

La Musardière      -Mon ami!... je vous en prie, parlez  
pour moi... dites-lui que ce n'est  
pas ma faute... (Il met un louis dans  
la main de Paturel: celui-ci paraît étonné)  
Ah! pardon, l'habitude...  
(IV, xi)

Finally, since they as much as anyone were the creators of the "Parisian" comedy of the nineteenth-century, Meilhac and Halévy may also be accounted partly responsible for the considerable vogue for such plays around the turn of the century. Their most direct and obvious disciples were the highly successful partnership of Robert de Flers and Gaston Arman de Caillavet, but their influence might also be seen in the Parisian comedies of Donnay, Lavedan, Hermant and Capus.

This brief account of Meilhac and Halévy's neglected comic theatre began by trying to set aside the habitual association of their names with the Second Empire, because in the final analysis what seems most striking in their work is their precocious modernity: in some of their dramaturgical practices, in their subject matter, in the values (or lack of them) which they implied, and in the spirit of their humour. As early as the Sixties, they had already marked out the terrain (the Paris of the cercleux, the smart idlers, the cocottes and the foreigners), and set the tone (sceptical, non-committal, ironical and urbanely nonchalant) which would still be in use in much of the most popular French light

comedy of the Belle Epoque.

## Meilhac and Halévy: Footnotes

1. Meilhac's birth-date was given as 1832 in Vapereau's Dictionnaire universel des contemporains (5th edition, 1880) and W.R. Benét's The Reader's Encyclopedia (2nd edition, 1977). After working in the book trade, Meilhac began to write and draw humorous items (some under the pseudonym 'Talin') for Le Journal pour rire and La Vie parisienne. He began to write for the stage around 1855. Besides those written with Halévy, he wrote a number of plays in the period 1871-1897, some alone, others with Louis Ganderax, Philippe Gille, Albert Millaud, Arnold Mortier, Emile de Najac, Charles Narrey, Jacques Redelsperg or Albin de Saint-Albin. He became a member of the Académie Française, in succession to Labiche, in 1888. Halévy came of a family of distinguished Jewish intellectuals. Marcel Achard stated that he was actually born on 31 December 1833, "seulement, on ne déclara sa venue en ce monde que le 1er janvier" (Rions avec eux, 72). He began his career as a civil servant under Morny, with whom he also collaborated on light stage works, notably M. Choufleury restera chez lui. He was one of Offenbach's collaborators from the opening of the first Bouffes-Parisiens, first as "Jules Servières", then under his own name. When his twenty-year partnership with Meilhac ended, he ceased to write for the stage but continued to publish his very popular novels, of which L'Abbé Constantin and the various chronicles of the Cardinal family are the best known. He was elected to the Academy in 1884.
2. Céline Chaumont (1848-1926), favourite pupil of Déjazet, made her stage début at 11 and was engaged at the Gymnase before moving to the Variétés. "Que représentait-elle? L'esprit parisien et féminin porté au comble." (Filon, 40) In time, her acting became mannered and the public grew tired of the showcases created for her at the Variétés and Palais-Royal, and she lost her status as the incarnation of the Parisienne to a much greater actress, Réjane.
3. The role of La Cigale was again tailor-made for Céline Chaumont, for example, allowing her to show her juggling and tumbling skills, but the other roles were more than mere comparses.
4. Parigot, 336.
5. "Ce théâtre si spirituel est tendre. Il n'est nullement impossible, à certains endroits de la Cigale, de Margot, de la Petite mère, de se sentir 'un désir de larmes'." (Lemaître, Impressions, 10, 191-92).
6. A very popular piece with a complicated history. Based on Julius Roderich Benedix' Das Gefängnis, Le Réveillon was itself adapted by Carl Haffner and Richard Genée to form the libretto of the classic Viennese operetta Die Fledermaus (1874).
7. Lemaître, op. cit., 181-82.

8. Ibid., 183. Compare Croisset, 58: "C'est un théâtre réaliste, dont les personnages sont quotidiens. Ils ne sont ni très supérieurs, ni très vertueux, ni très vicieux non plus: ils sont courants."
9. In Le Bien public, 15 October 1877.
10. Lemaître, op. cit., 184.
11. Ibid., 183.
12. Pierre Voltz has written of Ubu roi: "La pièce procède directement des parodies de Meilhac et Halévy et de leur esthétique vaudevillesque, indifférente à la profondeur individuelle des personnages et à la vraisemblance réaliste du décor." (La Comédie, 163-64). The final phrase in particular has more relevance to the operettas than to the comedies of this period.
13. The anti-illusionist ending of Le Réveillon is another clear example of "self-conscious stage".
14. "Meilhac et Halévy ont créé un type d'amoureux tout à fait moderne, (...) c'est l'amoureux qui n'est pas très intelligent et qui serait même volontiers un peu bête. Il est bête, mais il est gentil à regarder. Les femmes l'aiment, non seulement malgré sa gaucherie cérébrale, mais un peu à cause de cela." (Croisset, 54). See also notes 25 and 29 below.
15. Lemaître, op. cit., 182.
16. Ibid., 185.
17. Ibid., 182.
18. Ibid., 183.
19. When Lemaître's article was published, on 16 January 1888, the Théâtre-Libre (founded the previous year) was about to stage Tolstoy's La Puissance des ténèbres, which was widely expected to introduce a new dramaturgy. See Antoine, Le Théâtre-Libre, 155-161.
20. Lemaître, Impressions, 3, 211.
21. Ibid., 213.
22. Ibid., 214.
23. Parigot, 331.
24. Croisset, 59.
25. Parigot wrote of La Petite marquise: "L'oeuvre est encore aristocratique par un nouveau ridicule du mari, qui n'est ni gourmand, ni jaloux, ni congestionné, ni soupçonneux, mais érudit!" (335). Kergazon in this play, and the astronomer Laborderie in Le Passage de Vénus (Variétés,

3 May 1875), sole specimens of the scholar in these comedies, were both naïve and ridiculous. As Parigot's footnote implied, Meilhac and Halévy's flattering of their public's anti-intellectual prejudices was like Pailleron's in Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie and L'Age ingrat.

26. Croisset, 48.
27. Ibid., 58-59.
28. Lemaître, Impressions, 10, 191.
29. "Le couple amoureux, chez Meilhac et Halévy, est presque toujours personnifié par un jeune homme niais et une petite femme roublarde." (Croisset, 57).
30. A very significant shift in social attitudes in the middle of the century allowed the cocotte and demi-mondaine to emerge on to the stage, replacing the merry widow who had held sway from Molière's Célimène to the comedy of Scribe's generation.
31. The cocotte in La Mi-carême was also Marguerite Lamberthier. It was a minor peculiarity of Meilhac and Halévy's theatre to re-use characters' names, so there were, for example, several different La Rochebardières (or La Roche-Bardières), Lamberthiers, Métellas and Marquises de Château-Lansac. Rather than any wish to imitate Balzac by creating a whole fictive world from interlocking peices, the reason may have been that experience had confirmed that these plausible-sounding names were safe, belonging to no tetchy real-life individuals who might sue.
32. See Andrew de Ternant, "The Courtesan on the French Stage", and Sidney D. Braun, The 'Courtisane' in the French Theatre from Hugo to Becque.
33. Parigot, 343-44.
34. Becque, Oeuvres complètes, 7. 57.
35. Ibid. Parigot too felt "Point d'amertume en eux, ni d'insistance dans la satire." (333).
36. This was true at least in a special sense. In several of the earlier plays (e.g. Tricoche), the script allowed for the actor's gagging with the notation "Jeu de scène". Curiously, this practice was like nothing so much as Becque's own "open" stage-directions in Les Corbeaux.
37. Becque, op. cit., 58.
38. "Il a fondé le théâtre anti-scribiste. A bien des égards, il est le précurseur du Théâtre-Libre, dans ce que le Théâtre-Libre eut parfois d'excellent." (Lemaître, Impressions, 10, 183-84.
39. Ibid., 192.

EDOUARD PAILLERON (1834-1899)<sup>1</sup>.

Edouard Pailleron is virtually forgotten today.<sup>2</sup> The layman has probably never seen or even read any of his plays; he is merely a name, like Gondinet or Capus, mentioned for the record in histories of the French theatre in the nineteenth century.

Yet in his own day he was a very successful and popular playwright, even a member of the Académie Française, which would suggest that his work is a good indication of French theatrical taste during the period from about 1860 to 1890 or so. Moreover, his better plays were not without some intrinsic merit. Among these, his three-act comedy Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie must undoubtedly take pride of place, since it survived the general decline of Pailleron's reputation to hold the stage successfully for half a century after its creation in 1881.

Pailleron had already been established as a dramatist under the Second Empire. He had begun his career in 1860, with a one-act verse comedy entitled Le Parasite, not to be confused with Les Parasites, a volume of verse published the same year.<sup>3</sup>

In 1861, Le Mur mitoyen, a two-act comedy in verse, was produced at the Odéon. In a sense, this play too was about parasites: the shady lawyers Finot and Tringlet deliberately fomented for their own profit the legal wrangle about the wall of the title. The play adumbrated some of the themes which would later reappear, treated with much more depth and subtlety, in Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie and later works, such as the conflict of sham and sincerity, the relations between the aristocracy and the middle classes,

unscrupulous ambition and exploitation, and the like.

Another two-act verse comedy, Le Dernier quartier, touching on the disillusionments of marriage, was seen by the Parisian public in 1863. Following this, the author tried his hand at drame with Le Second mouvement, a three-act play in verse staged without much success in 1865. A new collection of verse, Amours et haines was also published that year.

Pailleron turned to prose for his one-act comedy Le Monde où l'on s'amuse, produced at the Gymnase in 1868 with considerable success. Nevertheless, his four-act play Les Faux ménages, staged by the Théâtre-Français the following year, was again written in verse.

The crises of the Franco-Prussian war, the collapse of the Second Empire and the Commune troubles now supervened, and from those years we have only two patriotic poems declaimed from the stage of the Comédie-Française, Le Départ in 1870 and Prière pour la France in 1871.

His return to drama was with L'Autre motif, a prose comedy in one act created at the Comédie-Française on 29 February 1872, giving the elegant actress Mme Arnould-Plessy a personal success in the lead role. The play had forty-two performances in its first year alone, and remained in the repertory for many years.

It was a simple play, turning on a single, wry proposition about human - or rather, male - behaviour. Being a beautiful and charming woman with no husband in evidence, Mme d'Hailly was positively beset with ardent admirers. However, since she was both honourable and shrewd, she had found an infallible defence against their importunities.

Announcing that she was a widow and thus available pour le bon motif could usually be relied upon to send her adorers hastily about their business.

A somewhat similar situation of a decent woman under siege would later be seen in Becque's comedy Les Honnêtes femmes (1880), and women of the same general type - very attractive yet sage, mature and clever - would again be used very successfully in Pailleron's own later work.

The playwright was less successful with Hélène, a three-act tragédie bourgeoise in verse, also produced at the Comédie-Française, on 14 November 1872. The reviewers criticized the play's verse, and disliked its old-fashioned form and spirit, too reminiscent of Augier's Gabrielle and the théâtre utile.

After this setback, no new play by Pailleron was seen for three years, until the Comédie-Française produced Petite Pluie on 4 December 1875. This one-act prose comedy was set in a low inn, frequented by smugglers, on the French Riviera. A young woman, Mme de Thiais, had been forced to take shelter there by a storm and by an accident to her carriage while she was attempting to flee to Italy with a young diplomat, her admirer. She was overtaken at the inn by one of Pailleron's wise women of the world, determined to save her from the consequences of her folly. Stripped of her glamorous illusions about romance by the older woman's sceptical wit, and shaken by the belief that some gendarmes in the area (actually hunting a smuggler) were in pursuit of the runaway lovers, Mme de Thiais was soon persuaded to give up her rash escapade and return to her husband, such as he was.

The critics thought the comedy a slight piece, a "simple délassement d'esprit",<sup>4</sup> and reserved most of their



praise for the actors: Febvre, Emilie Broisat and especially Mme Arnould-Plessy, repeating much the same kind of role she had in L'Autre motif. Reviewing the play for the New York Tribune (29 January 1876), Henry James wrote:

M. Pailleron's comedy, Petite pluie by name, has had a moderate success, which it owes wholly to the incomparable skill of Mme Plessy. (...) This scene is acted by Mme Plessy with a spirit and style and grace - what the French call an authority - which are certainly the last word of high comedy.

A further three years were to elapse before Pailleron's next play: L'Age ingrat, a comedy in three acts, created at the Gymnase on 11 December 1878. To judge by the title, its main subject was intended to be the study of what today might be called the "mid-life crisis" in a group of Parisian men: Fondreton, Lahirel and Désaubiers. However, the title was criticized by some reviewers for not adequately reflecting the content of the play as a whole, and what was generally found to be most interesting was the second act, with its depiction of the equivocal foreign woman, a theme much in vogue since L'Etrangère (1876). Some of the critics felt that instead of being merely a subordinate episode, this should have been made into the main subject of a play.

As things were, however, the plot dealt principally with two marriages in jeopardy. One was that between Henriette and Fondreton, formerly a staid and respectable scholar but now the life and soul of the raffish salon of Julia Wacker,<sup>5</sup> a mysterious foreign countess, with whom he was infatuated. So too was Commandant de Sauves, separated from his bride of only six months, who had taken refuge with Henriette's mother, Mme Hébert. To make Mme de Sauves's situation worse, a roving bachelor named Désaubiers had designs on her and was

stealthily undermining any chance of her reconciliation with her husband. The climax of the action arrived when Mme de Sauves confronted Julia to try to get her to return Fondreton to his wife, and then was stunned to find her own husband among the foreign woman's courtiers. However, Julia mockingly handed both infatuated strays back to their wives, and the play ended in a double reconciliation.

The comedy was well received, but what interested critics and public alike most of all was the portrayal of Julia and her exotic circle. For one thing, according to Zola,

Dans la salle, le soir de la première, on souriait de certaines allusions, on croyait reconnaître la maison qui avait servi de modèle; et cela n'a certainement pas nui au succès.<sup>6</sup>

Besides this, though, the critics appreciated Pailleron's handling of the action in this act, brought skilfully to a climax in the unforeseen appearance of Commandant de Sauves and Julia's coolly ironical jibe to his shocked wife:

"Tenez! je vous rends aussi celui-là!"

Julia's characterization also found favour. Pailleron portrayed her distinctly and interestingly, but entirely from the outside. He suppressed such details as might have given a clue to her past, her inner nature, her values or her motives. It was not even possible to determine whether her title was genuine, what her nationality was or what she was doing in Paris. Audiences and critics were thoroughly intrigued by this exotic creature who seemed even more enigmatic than the semi-symbolic Mrs Clarkson of L'Etrangère.

Among other characteristic traits of the Pailleron manner, it might be noted that in its essentials L'Age ingrat

was another play in which female characters dominated the action and were the real centre of interest, and in which the decisive moment was a discussion between two women.

L'Age ingrat was also a comedy with the general lineaments of the formula which Pailleron would use later in Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie and Cabotins!: a comedy of manners which studied a special section of French contemporary society through a fairly large number of characters.

The cast at the Gymnase was remarkable, and the comedy was excellently acted, especially Saint-Germain's comic betrayal of the academic who had kicked over the traces, and Aimée Tessandier was tastefully foreign and intriguing as Julia. The acting greatly contributed to the success of L'Age ingrat, which ran for 135 nights, despite the general impression of a falling-off after the fantasy and bustle of the second act.

In the following spring, Pailleron had another success, though with a slighter play: L'Etincelle, a one-act comedy produced at the Comédie-Française on 13 May 1879. The rather far-fetched plot required the dashing Captain Raoul de Gêran<sup>7</sup> to counterfeit a lover's quarrel with Léonie de Rénat,<sup>8</sup> an attractive young widow - "dernière survivante du théâtre de Scribe", as Daudet mischievously remarked,<sup>9</sup> and, piquantly enough, Raoul's aunt (by marriage) - in the hope of striking a spark of passion in the heart of her spirited god-daughter Antoinette, whom he planned to marry. The quarrel was duly staged on a romantic mossy bench in the park, with Toinon eavesdropping in the bushes as planned. However, as they warmed to their roles the scenario was forgotten and they realized it was each other they loved. A sob from the bushes

recalled them to themselves; but Toinon was resilient and, gaily releasing Raoul from his engagement, she resolved to marry her other suitor instead.

Not surprisingly, the name of Musset was bandied about by the critics in their reviews of this little proverbe, and not just because the eavesdropping scene was so reminiscent of On ne badine pas avec l'amour, but because the whole fable and its atmosphere seemed to have something of his fantasy. Musset's psychological skill was another matter, though, and opinion has been divided, at best, about Pailleron's insight into emotional truth in the play. C.E. Montague was satisfied that

In Pailleron's L'Etincelle lively comedy rests on quite sound psychology. Original and comic use is made of the fact that speech and gesture are not merely symbols of feeling but modes of feeling.<sup>10</sup>

However, J.J. Weiss, allowing the basic idea of L'Etincelle to be well-conceived, witty and valid, found the analysis of love mediocre and lacking in acuity, remarking pithily that on such a well-worked theme,

Il nous faut de l'exquis ou il ne nous faut rien.  
On peut faire du demi-Scribe ou du demi-Sardou,  
on ne fait pas du demi-Musset ou du demi-Marivaux.<sup>11</sup>

Zola gave his answer to the question very clearly by setting it firmly aside:

Restons dans le simple badinage du proverbe, ne gonflons pas les choses jusqu'à parler maladroitement de haute comédie, d'observation et d'analyse. Dès lors, L'Etincelle devient un petit acte exquis, très heureusement équilibré, manoeuvrant des poupées proportionnées et opposées avec un art délicieux.<sup>12</sup>

On this matter of the dramatic skill shown in L'Etincelle, agreement was more or less general, and René Doumic thought that here Pailleron was superior to Musset:

L'Etincelle fait songer d'abord à un proverbe de Musset. Mais on voit tout de suite la différence. Musset ne savait rien hors des choses du coeur. M. Pailleron excelle à filer une scène, la teinter de sensibilité, doser l'émotion et tout arranger pour notre plus grand divertissement.<sup>13</sup>

The comedy featured two of Pailleron's favourite types of female character. Léonie was one of his poised and intelligent femmes de trente ans, as already seen in L'Autre motif and Petite pluie. Toinon was an early version of the "Pailleron girl", vivacious without quite being wild, but basically sensitive and pure in heart beneath her effervescence. Toinon was perhaps a shade more gauche and hoydenish than some later versions of the type, and this may have been reinforced by Jeanne Samary's fidgety performance in the role.

In general, though, the play was well served by its actors. Delaunay - "the silver-tongued, the ever-young" as Henry James called him - then about fifty-three, was by Zola's report "plus jeune que jamais dans le rôle de Raoul";<sup>14</sup> Sophie Croizette impressed with her subtle account of Léonie; and though Jeanne Samary was not entirely to everyone's taste as Toinon, the gay laughter for which she was well-known was here found ample employment.

For a variety of reasons, Pailleron's little proverbe greatly appealed to the public. Adverting to the lines on first love which begin: "D'où te viendra l'amour, enfant sereine et blonde...", Edouard de Morsier recalled:

Pour la première fois, peut-être, on a bissé des vers au théâtre, quand Delaunay soupira ceux-ci à la première de l'Etincelle,<sup>15</sup>

and when the curtain fell, according to Zola's review,<sup>16</sup>

Le soir de la première représentation, la salle se passionne, applaudit à tout rompre et rappelle deux fois les acteurs, ce qui est rare dans la maison de Molière.

The next of Pailleron's plays to be staged - Pendant le bal, a one-act comedy in verse created on 5 March 1881 by the Comédie-Française - was so slight as to be negligible.<sup>17</sup> It had no particular structure, no plot whatever, and no subject except "à quoi rêvent les jeunes filles", as conceived by the most banal, nineteenth-century, middle-class convention. The validity of its characterization was vitiated from the outset by the fact that the two girls who made up the cast had manifestly been created specifically as polar opposites. Lucie was a "Pailleron girl", energetic and positive, while Angélique was her dreamy and lymphatic antithesis. The excitement of their sister's wedding-ball had left one flushed, and one pale. Lucie hoped to marry a general while Angélique dreamed of a poet. And so forth.

Pendant le bal was one of a little collection of expressly escapist pieces published as Le Théâtre chez Madame, and it is surprizing that this should have been the first of them to be publicly staged, because one might have thought such a slender berquinade much better suited to performance in the salon rather than the theatre.

Just a few weeks after Pendant le bal, on 25 April 1881, the Comédie-Française created a work of an entirely different order, Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie. This three-act comedy in prose was Pailleron's masterpiece, if ever he wrote one, and his chief claim to fame, both in his lifetime and for some decades after.

One might almost say that the play was a success before it opened. It had been much discussed beforehand,<sup>18</sup> especially as it was rumoured once again to be a pièce à clefs.<sup>19</sup> The lecturer-star Bellac was supposed to be the

popular philosopher Elme Caro, for instance.<sup>20</sup> In consequence the comedy was awaited with eager curiosity. The actor Got wrote in his diary on 24 April:

Il y a eu ce matin répétition générale devant une centaine de personnes et cette salade parisienne a eu un très vif succès. La lecture au comité, puis la lecture aux artistes en avaient d'ailleurs donné déjà l'impression unanime.

The promise of the dress-rehearsal was certainly not belied by that of the premiere, to judge by Barbey d'Aurevilly's sardonic account: "Cela a été lundi un enthousiasme, un ravissement, une pâmoison, une suite de pâmoisons, un délire." The reasons for the comedy's enthusiastic reception are not far to seek. In the first place, it had a very workmanlike plot, carefully constructed after the familiar pattern of the pièce bien faite. The whole thing turned on the classic device of a letter, mislaid and misinterpreted; and exposition, preparations, reversals, suspense and resolution were handled with the orthodox deftness of a Sardou.<sup>21</sup>

The comedy's second major asset was its dialogue, which was witty and full of interest. Paul Fechter has rightly stressed the crucial importance of words and their usage in this play:

Sie ist typisches Konversationsstück, das vom Dialog, von der Sprache aus gestaltet ist, ein Spiel mit Worten, das die Überbewertung der Worte vor allem in der Figur des Bellac witzig verspottet.<sup>22</sup>

Several sorts of word-based humour were effectively used by the playwright. There was satire of various kinds of language, such as the unctuousness and vapid rhetoric of Bellac,<sup>23</sup> and the sugary preciosity of his female admirers. Satire was implicit, too, in the contrast between the

unaffected and "high society" styles used by Paul and Jeanne. There was even literary satire in the snatches of Des Millets's Philippe-Auguste intermittently heard off-stage in the latter part of the second act.<sup>24</sup>

Conscious wit was abundant, represented on the one hand by the forced mots of the guests in Act II, and on the other by the genuinely amusing sallies of Paul, Jeanne and the duchess, each of whom had a distinctive personal style.

In contrast with the studied use of words by the others, Suzanne's artless outspokenness was sometimes comic and sometimes refreshing.

The question of diction is obviously related to that of characterization, and this was something else that Pailleron handled well. As Dumesnil shrewdly pointed out

C'est que chaque rôle est traité en 'soliste',  
(...) c'est que chaque acteur brille dans un  
couplet, une tirade, une scène dont il est la  
vedette.<sup>25</sup>

Reference to the text shows the truth of this observation. Apart from the dénouement, where Mme de Réville dominated and manipulated the others like puppets, this was in effect a play with eight co-principals, all drawn in comparable detail and of almost equal importance.

In actors' terms, of course, this meant that the play abounded in good parts, which were excellently cast and played in the original production. Madeleine Brohan (Mme de Réville), Suzanne Reichemberg (Jeanne) and Jeanne Samary (Suzanne) were perfectly cast in their roles; Delaunay played Roger with his customary distinction and Coquelin made the best of Paul Raymond's comic potential; while Got's Bellac was a remarkable creation.<sup>26</sup>

Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie doubtless owed some, but not



all, of its very great success to the brilliance of its original cast. The many years of popularity it subsequently enjoyed both in France<sup>27</sup> and abroad suggest that, like Rostand in Cyrano, Pailleron succeeded in this comedy in appealing to a kind of public which was only very slowly eroded by time and changing theatrical fashions.

On the other hand, some aspects of the comedy clearly had a unique relevance to one particular time and place and to one particular society: that of fin-de-siècle France. Augustin Filon wrote of Pailleron:

Il n'a pas de rival lorsqu'il s'agit de mettre en scène cette région particulière où fleurit le pédantisme mondain, où sévit le virus politico-académique, où l'on fabrique, entre deux tasses de thé, des députés et des 'immortels'. Si le Monde où l'on s'ennuie cessait jamais - ce que je ne crois pas - d'être du théâtre vivant, cette pièce demeurerait un document pour l'histoire des mœurs.<sup>28</sup>

The next of Pailleron's plays to reach the stage was another of the little pieces which had been published in Le Théâtre chez Madame, a one-act verse comedy entitled Le Narcotique, produced at the Porte-Saint-Martin on 23 April 1882. It was a nostalgic trifle which involved the traditional figures of Pierrot, Cassandre and Isabelle, a soubrette (Marinette) and a disguised gallant (Octave) in a simple action indebted at once to the commedia dell' arte, to Molière and to Regnard. The result was something like the archaizing farces of Catulle Mendès. The verse was somewhat turbid, as Pailleron's verse often was, and the humour was as broad as in most exercises of this kind, but it was agreeable enough, and so unassuming that it passed virtually unnoticed by press or public.

In 1882, Pailleron was elected to the Académie Française,

but no new play by him was produced until 18 November 1887, when the Comédie-Française created La Souris, a three-act comedy in prose. There is no mistaking the disappointment which La Souris occasioned after Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie, and indeed it was a much lesser work, flawed by a cumulative series of errors of judgement on Pailleron's part.

The most apparent of these were faults of form. The subject was of the same order and scale as that of L'Etincelle; indeed in certain respects it quite closely resembled it, only that in this case the hero opted at last for the seventeen-year-old, and it was the widow of thirty who was sacrificed, or rather, unselfishly sacrificed herself. However, the earlier play had been in only one act, while in La Souris a comparable action was spun out over three.<sup>29</sup>

One way in which extra material was generated was by making both young Marthe and le beau Max waver in their mutual love in the final act because of qualms of conscience: Marthe because she realized her sister Clotilde was also in love with Max; and Max because of the difference in their ages. Since both were once again set to marry by the end of the play, it is not easy to see the point of this detour, unless Pailleron was simply padding out his third act; or adding a twist to the plot to play further on the public's feelings; or trying to show Marthe and Max were not insensitive. If the last was Pailleron's object, the device was uninspired. It simply replaced blind selfishness with conscious selfishness, since having examined the implications of their actions both ended by doing precisely what they wanted to do anyway.

It really is as likely an explanation as any that the playwright was playing for time. In support of what may seem

a simplistic suggestion, it should perhaps be pointed out that there might have been no third act at all if Clotilde had not unaccountably kept from everyone the crucial news that she was now a widow.

The other way in which quite a small plot was inflated to three-act proportions was by the arbitrary introduction of two further characters: Hermine de Sagancey and Pepa Raimbaud. The reviewers were unanimous in thinking that this invention was ill-advised. The arrival of these Parisian supernumeraries at Mme de Moisand's country home was all too contrived, and the artificiality of their inclusion was made worse by the way in which the scenes involving them were handled by the author. Their function in the play - one cannot say in the plot - required Hermine and Pepa to compete for Max's favour with Clotilde, Marthe and with each other. Pailleron brought this about in scenes of a mechanical symmetry, in which each of the two in turn set her cap at Max.

Yet another though lesser structural weakness was the way in which Mme de Moisand was treated virtually as a personnage protatique, having no real function at all but to provide the exposition.

Clumsy as some of these structural flaws were, they were probably less damaging to the play than Pailleron's miscalculations of tonality. In this respect, too, Hermine and Pepa were his grossest error. No doubt they were intended to be comic, but the kind of comedy they represented was out of key with the rest. They were cut from the same cloth as the guests in the second act of Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie, whereas Max, Marthe, and Clotilde in particular were of the register of Raoul, Toinon and Léonie in L'Étincelle; that is, Hermine and Pepa were satirical caricatures

in a play of sentiment and even pathos.

It was probably also in Pailleron's mind that four women would be better than two in stressing Max's attractiveness to women; but Jules Lemaître put his finger unerringly on the risk involved when he wrote: "Il ne fallait pas que Max fût songer un seul instant à Célimare."<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, it has proved only too easy to see Max in exactly this light. Pailleron seems unwittingly to have transgressed the subtle threshold between what is genuinely impressive and what is burlesque. For Max to be taken seriously, it was vital that his extraordinary charm should seem credible. Doubtless for some it was: Parigot considered him the most charming and elegant, as well as the most profoundly drawn of all Pailleron's male characters. However, there is room for suspicion that Max benefitted from Parigot's distaste for the shallow whipper-snappers of the younger generation:

Max est le brillant exemplaire d'un monde qui finit, et d'une éducation qui s'en va; il a le relief d'une génération presque disparue, et déjà remplacée par une société plus jeune d'hommes plus superficiels.<sup>31</sup>

Viewed without misoneistic bias, however, Max may appear less admirable: an ageing beau who had been well content to flirt with the married Clotilde and to tease Marthe, gratuitously and with deplorable insensitivity, until the day that, indiscreetly prying into Marthe's sketch-book, he learned he had the chance to win a girl young enough to be his daughter. Thereupon he asked Clotilde, of all people, to press his suit with Marthe. It is not to be wondered at that most of the play's critics have been ill at ease with it. Taken all in all, La Souris was a rather unpleasant play in ways that the playwright does not seem to have intended or

even realized.

Conversely, the critics have been kind, in general, to Le Chevalier Trumeau. This one-act comedy in verse was another of the saynètes published in Le Théâtre chez Madame, which had for some reason remained unperformed for ten years, until 21 February 1891, when it formed part of a spectacle coupé at the Bodinière. It is hard to determine why it was passed over for so long, as it was at least as appealing as Pendant le bal or Le Narcotique. It was, in fact, a particular favourite among Pailleron's works with the critic J.J. Weiss, who wrote of it (admittedly prior to the premiere of Le Monde Où l'on s'ennuie): "C'est la perle de son écrin, le Chevalier Trumeau!"<sup>32</sup>

It was another historical pastiche; specifically, an imitation of Marivaux. Various motifs were strongly reminiscent of Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard: the idea of the unwilling bride, on which the saynète turns; the argument that marriage changes suitors for the worse; and Marton's earthy advocacy of love and marriage were all closely imitated from Marivaux's first scene.

Some attempt seems to have been made to borrow certain of Marivaux's stylistic devices, too, but with indifferent discernment or success. Thus, for instance, the broken style, interspersed with unanswered questions, which Marivaux had lent to the troubled Silvia was imitated in some of Isabelle's lines; but Pailleron showed little understanding of the purpose to which it was so brilliantly put by Marivaux.

It was an amiable little piece, just the same. Pailleron seems to have been thoroughly at his ease with an all-female

cast: one "Pailleron girl" and one classic soubrette. The play contained a travestie scene, then popular, some fairly good comic lines for Marton in particular, and some of the author's more competent dramatic verse.

After Le Chevalier Trumeau, four further years were to pass before the dramatist's next play. It was on 12 February 1894 that the Comédie-Française created Cabotins!, a comedy in four acts which returned to the satirical vein of Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie. Once again, however, the play failed to find favour with the critics, as Gustave Larroumet would wittily recall a few years later:

Rarement la critique s'était trouvé en aussi parfait accord sur la valeur d'une pièce que pour Cabotins! (...) Elle les avait jugés non seulement mauvais, mais médiocres.<sup>33</sup>

The reviewers' dissatisfaction began with the play's very title which, they objected, fitted only where it touched, since much of the play's content, even some of the foibles satirized, had nothing to do with cabotinage in any strict sense.

The conception of the subject was condemned, on the grounds that the love-story involving Valentine and Pierre Cardevent and the satire on Pégomas and his cronies were virtually two distinct plays, one a drame and one a vaudeville; and, as René Doumic wrote, "d'un vaudeville avec un mélodrame on n'a jamais fait une comédie."<sup>34</sup>

Some felt that as if it were not enough to have two independent plots already, there was a hint of a third in the pathetic story of Grigneux, linked to the Valentine/Pierre plot in what seemed an artificial and unnecessary fashion.

The love-story itself was criticized as being trite, predictable, protracted and simply not very interesting.

Indeed, the general opinion was that even of the "vaudeville" half of the play, the only scenes which really came to life were those in which Pégomas appeared. Though the satirical part was superior to the pathetic part, on the whole, certain of the cabotins were considered thin and artificial caricatures:

Au total, pas trace d'observation dans ces esquisses de cabots; cela est croqué de chic; ce sont silhouettes purement vaudevillesques, si faiblement individuelles qu'elles en deviennent indiscernables...<sup>35</sup>

The character of Pégomas, too, was not of the subtlest or most life-like, but it was at least strongly marked, comic, and endowed with vitality, so that he totally dominated the play in a way that was rather unusual for a male character in Pailleron's work.

The critics did have one serious reproach to make about the character of Pégomas, however, and indeed about the whole play: that they were unduly derivative. It was a familiar charge which, in every key from discreet hints to outright denunciations of plagiarism, had been laid against nearly every play that Pailleron had written. Le Parasite was supposed to have been suggested by Augier's La Ciguë, Les Faux ménages by La Dame aux camélias, Hélène by Gabrielle, and the resemblances between the second act of L'Age ingrat and L'Etrangère, and between L'Etincelle and On ne badine pas avec l'amour have already been noted. Emile Morlot began his review of La Souris with the perfidious apophasis: "Je ne ferai pas de comparaison déplacée entre La Souris et Trois femmes pour un mari...",<sup>36</sup> then went on to mention, in passing, the similarity between Marthe and the Geneviève of Gondinet's Un Parisien.

Others had been less urbane and less oblique. Henry Céard<sup>37</sup> had written of Pailleron with some warmth in L'Express (29 April 1881):

Son oeuvre théâtrale déconcerte la critique par l'excès de ses réminiscences, la tranquillité d'adaptation de ses souvenirs. Ici, c'est du Marivaux, ici c'est du Scribe, quelquefois du Molière, et par hasard du Diderot. Continuons. Voici de l'Alfred de Musset, puis voici Carmontelle, et nous reconnaissons Ponsard.

Cabotins! probably drew more criticism in this respect than any other play by Pailleron. Larroumet was expressing the view taken by almost all the critics when he wrote:

Son imitation était si directe et si reconnaissable, elle s'appliquait à des originaux si connus qu'elle en était choquante.<sup>38</sup>

In his review, Jules Lemaître adopted the quietly devastating device of noting the resemblances glancingly, as it were:

L'abandonnée se réfugie alors, naïvement, chez son seul ami, le bon sculpteur Cardevent, qui, la soupçonnant indigne, est travaillé du même mal que Bardanne auprès de Denise; ce dont la maman Cardevent se désole, comme Rose Mamaï dans L'Arlésienne...,<sup>39</sup>

and so on throughout the whole play, indicating parallels with more than half a dozen works, by Dumas fils, Scribe, Daudet, Goncourt, Sardou, Bisson, Barrière and Mürger. Others made the point more bluntly, but all pointed to the similarity between the raffish brotherhood of La Tomate and the artists of La Vie de Bohème, the echos in Pégomas of Numa Roumestan and Rabagas, and the resemblance of the plot in the last act to that of Le Député de Bombignac.

Yet the really instructive aspect of all this is that the general public do not seem to have cared a jot about Pailleron's alleged borrowings. Nor, for that matter, did they attach any great importance to the other faults found



in the play by the reviewers. Within days of the first performance Henri Chapoy<sup>40</sup> had sensed that the public were going to ignore critical opinion and save a play which, in spite of everything, made them laugh; and so it proved. With the professional critics against it almost to a man, Cabotins! received 102 performances in 1894, thus furnishing one of the more striking instances in this period of the significant difference in the criteria observed by the critics and by ordinary theatre patrons.

Pailleron's last work for the stage was a novelty piece entitled Mieux vaut douceur... et violence, created at the Comédie-Française on 29 January 1897, two years before the playwright's death. Its form was unusual, best described as a proverbe en deux parties, because it was a diptych of two one-act plays, a little like Lavedan and Guiches's Les Quarts d'heure (1888), in fact. Violence was staged as a lever de rideau and Douceur as a baisser de rideau;<sup>41</sup> but although separated by the main feature of the programme the two were linked by theme, providing contrasting solutions to the problem of how a wife should cure an errant husband. Violence advocated the efficacy of a vigorous quarrel, while Douceur commended a winning sweetness and humility.<sup>42</sup> Although the two saynètes were conceived as a set, so to speak, they appear to have had independent careers, since according to Joannidès' statistics, Douceur received fifty-three performances and Violence sixty-three in 1897. The number of performances and their relative popularities are the more surprising since the critics had a clear preference for Douceur and the acting of Violence appears to have been poor. Once again, public opinion was considerably more

favourable to the work than critical opinion, which seems adequately summed up in Philippe Malpy's comment that the proverbe "échappe à la critique à force d'être insignifiant."<sup>43</sup>

Pailleron's career is instructive about theatrical taste. With his old-fashioned values and his loyalty to the well-made play, he managed to retain a certain popularity almost to the turn of the century, despite the gradual defection of the critics after Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie, indicating a steadily conservative element in the theatrical public.

Pailleron: Footnotes

1. In his Twenty Years in Paris (Hutchinson, 1905, 119), R.H. Sherard called the playwright "Maxime Pailleron", an odd slip for so experienced a journalist.
2. Pailleron does not appear in many commonly used, non-specialist reference works, e.g. the 1962 edition of the Seghers Dictionnaire illustré des auteurs français, The Penguin Companion to Literature, the Thames and Hudson Illustrated Encyclopedia of World Theatre, Gassner and Quinn's Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama, etc., nor in Hobson's French Theatre since 1830 or Allardyce Nicoll's World Drama. W.N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley did include him in the Everyman Dictionary of European Writers (Dent, 1968), but the credibility of the entry was impugned by 1) the inclusion among his "best" plays of the resounding failure Hélène, and 2) the description of Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie as "a satire on university life from the professorial point of view." William Rose Benét's description of the play, in the second edition of The Reader's Encyclopedia, as a satire on the affectation of "would-be ladies" hardly inspires more confidence.
3. The near-repetition seems in itself an apt symbol of Pailleron's notorious penchant for the revenez-y. Henry Céard pounced on the signification of the title: "Jamais titre de volume ne renseigne mieux sur la personnalité littéraire d'un auteur; jamais écrivain n'avoua d'une manière plus délibérée son manque d'originalité." (L'Express, 29 April 1881)
4. Justin Dupain, Revue des poètes et des auteurs dramatiques, (1873), 776.
5. "Wackers" (Parigot), "Waker" (Dumesnil), "Walker" (Zola).
6. Zola, Le Voltaire, 24 December 1878.
7. Zola, in Le Voltaire, 20 May 1879, gave the name as "Raoul de Lansay", with the comment "un nom trop joli."
8. "Léonie de Rénauld" (Zola and Daudet), "Rénaul" (Weiss).
9. Pages inédites de critique dramatique, 100.
10. Dramatic Values, 68-69.
11. "Edouard Pailleron", Le Figaro, 2 April 1881.
12. Zola, Le Voltaire, 20 May 1879.
13. Essais sur le théâtre contemporain, Perrin, 1897, 68-69.
14. Zola, ibid.
15. "La Déclaration d'amour dans le théâtre moderne", 370.
16. Zola, ibid.

17. However, Hippolyte Parigot considered that "Pendant le bal rappelle la gracieuse fantaisie d'Alfred de Musset", (Le Théâtre d'hier, 278), and Francis Waterhouse, too, included it among the author's "dainty miniatures" which, he thought, "embody the same qualities of sentimental idealism and exquisite irony that belong to the nineteenth-century romanticist." ("Edouard Pailleron: a study in Romantic psychology," 101.)
18. "Le public littéraire et le public lettré s'occupent assez vivement de la pièce avant qu'elle ne soit représentée," wrote Weiss (op. cit.) a few weeks before the creation.
19. See W.L. Schwartz, "The Question of Personal Caricature in Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie," and also R. Dumesnil, "Le Réalisme et le Naturalisme, 422 and E. Carassus, Le Snobisme et les lettres françaises, 88 & 90. Pailleron did not so much dispel as feebly discourage this notion in his preface to the Calmann-Lévy edition.
20. "Ce digne savant, mis à la scène sous les traits du salonnier Bellac, s'en irrita si fort que Pailleron faillit en perdre l'Académie," (R. Peter, Le Théâtre et la vie, 1, 103.) Paul Fechter has noted that in German productions (down to the Berlin version with Theodor Loos) it was customary for Bellac to be made to resemble some leading German academic of the day (Das Europäische Drama, I, 425).
21. Henry Becque felt the play should have given more prominence to Mme de Céran, a sort of modern Philaminte, whereas, "Celle qu'on nous montre n'a ni caractère, ni physionomie, rien. Nous avons à sa place une femme d'esprit, d'esprit assez grossier parfois, qui mène toute la pièce et dont la pièce pourrait très bien se passer." (Oeuvres complètes, 7, 59)
22. Fechter, loc. cit.
23. "Bellac, du Monde où l'on s'ennuie, n'était pas difficile à inventer, puisqu'il est toujours dans la réalité et qu'il suffisait de s'en aviser; ce qui était malaisé, c'était de lui trouver son style, et c'est à quoi Pailleron a admirablement réussi." (E. Faquet, L'Art de lire, 58)
24. "Aujourd'hui, les oeuvres dramatiques ne s'intitulent plus, en général, comédies, ni surtout tragédies (depuis Philippe-Auguste, la tragédie dont il est question dans le Monde où l'on s'ennuie, il faudrait un courage surhumain pour oser s'y risquer)." ("Doublemain", "Propos de théâtre: les Titres", 161).
25. Dumesnil, op. cit., 423. Augustin Filon saw things differently: "Dans son théâtre, lorsqu'un personnage a été posé en deux ou trois tirades, qu'il a lancé, comme autant de projectiles, les mots à effet dont l'auteur avait, à l'avance, bourré sa cartouchière, ce personnage n'aura plus sur les lèvres que d'insigni-

fiantes répliques; il rentre dans l'ombre jusqu'au moment où l'auteur le convoquera au dénouement." (De Dumas à Rostand, 47-48)

26. Nobody had wanted the role. Got wrote in his diary (24 April 1881): "Je joue là-dedans, par incorrigible Don-Quichottisme de doyen et d'ancien ami de l'auteur, un rôle exécrable pour moi, Bellac (le Caro-Trissotin), que tous les sociétaires avaient nettement refusé les uns après les autres." Despite the impression he made, Got took the first opportunity to relinquish the rôle to Prudhon.
27. By the end of 1969, it had received one thousand performances at the Comédie-Française alone - more than Cyrano de Bergerac.
28. Filon, op. cit., 45.
29. In his diary entry for 17 September 1887, Got wondered: "Y a-t-il assez de pièce au fond pour trois longs actes?"
30. Lemaître, Impressions, 3, 240.
31. Parigot, op. cit., 269.
32. Weiss, op. cit.
33. In Le Temps, 9 July 1900.
34. Essais sur le théâtre contemporain, 76.
35. Impressions, 8, 247.
36. In R.A.D., 8 (1887), 299.
37. The previous year, Céard had written to Zola regarding L'Étincelle: "Je constate que deux scènes entières sont prises presque mot pour mot dans Renée Mauperin. Personne n'a vu ça: ou si on l'a vu, personne ne l'a dit." (4 September 1880).
38. Larroumet, op. cit.
39. Lemaître, op. cit., 243.
40. In R.A.D., 33 (1 March 1894), 304.
41. According to Filon, De Dumas à Rostand, 131. Malpy's review in R.A.D., NS1 (November 1896-June 1897), 345 refers to Violence as "la seconde partie du proverbe", however. It is possible they saw different performances, especially as the cast details given differ.
42. Given Pailleron's reputation, it was perhaps inevitable that a parallel should be found between the plot of Douceur and Les Noces de Jeannette: see Malpy, loc. cit.
43. Ibid. Filon (op. cit., 131) tartly remarked: "Ce ne

sont pas ces deux pochades à la Verconsin qui auraient fait entrer M. Pailleron à l'Académie."

HENRY BECQUE (1837-1899)

Henry-François Becque gives the impression of having lived and died a disappointed man, who felt that his work had never been appreciated at its worth. He would appear to have been a difficult man to get along with: very quick to take umbrage, sarcastic, bitter and envious of others' success. As a literary critic he was often harsh, as a polemicist he was simply ferocious,<sup>1</sup> and he could be demanding and stubborn in his dealings with the directors of his plays and crushing with his actors.

Yet there was evidently another side to this curmudgeon. He wrote of himself: "Je passe pour un homme amer, brutal, affreux; je vis dans une paix recueillie et sereine",<sup>2</sup> and one cannot be unaware of the loyalty he seems to have inspired, both in those who knew him personally, like Paul Adam, Georges Ancey, André Antoine, Octave Mirbeau, the Muhlfields and the Rostands, and in scholars who have studied him closely, most notably Alexandre Arnaoutovitch, but also the more objective Vittorio Lugli and Maurice Descotes.

Anyone familiar with the theatrical life of France at this time must also be aware that Becque had a quite special status in the eyes of fellow-dramatists and theatre people, a sort of respect having nothing to do with the degree to which the public accepted his work, and not much affected either by allegiance to schools or movements.<sup>3</sup> Across partisan divisions, most of his peers recognized originality and integrity in his work and sympathized with his long and largely unavailing struggle for public acceptance.

Born in 1837, he began writing for the stage towards the age of thirty,<sup>4</sup> and his work both reflects the influence of

Dumas fils and the boulevard, and points forward to Antoine.

Before the Franco-Prussian war, Becque had had three works for the stage produced: the opera Sardanapale, adapted from Byron's tragedy and set to music by Victorien de Joncières, which was presented at the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1867; L'Enfant prodigue, classed as a four-act comedy but closer to a vaudeville, produced in 1868 at the Théâtre du Vaudeville; and a five-act drama with socialist tendencies, Michel Pauper, staged at the Porte-Saint-Martin in June 1870.

Written in some haste immediately after the war, Becque's next play, L'Enlèvement, was produced at the Vaudeville on 18 September 1871. It was badly received by public and press and ran for only five performances. Although described as a comédie en trois actes, it will be dealt with only briefly here since it was really a comédie dramatique, like those of Dumas fils. In fact, it resembled his work in a number of ways; but not, unfortunately, in craftsmanship. Almost its only point of interest is as an early specimen of the divorce play, anticipating Augier's Madame Caverlet by five years. It was a thesis play, concerned with the plight of Emma de Sainte-Croix, neglected by her husband Raoul, a cynical philanderer, and eventually forced to choose an irregular union with her admirer la Rouvre, since no legal remedy for her situation was available.

The treatment was didactic and grave rather than comic, though the shallow Raoul was given some fairly stale and artificial mots appropriate to his character, and the unscheduled arrival in the second act of his imperious mistress Antoinette gave rise to a comic situation of quite another register: in Maurice Descotes' words it was "une



scène de vaudeville qui finit par s'égarer dans le burlesque."<sup>5</sup>

The play was very deficient in execution altogether. The exposition was clumsy and forced. The style was declamatory, platitudinous and oddly dated, for the most part. The characters showed nothing of Becque's later skill, tending towards types: the worthy but neglected wife, the worthless husband and the like. Construction was poor, and the plot was not above dubious coincidences, such as that Raoul's mistress proved to be la Rouvre's legal wife. It was, in short, a play showing all of the weaknesses and virtually none of the strengths associated with Becque's work.

According to Becque himself, it was because he could find no theatre willing to produce Les Corbeaux that he wrote his one-act comedy La Navette, originally entitled Seul. At first, this work too was refused by the leading comedy theatres, the Palais-Royal, Variétés and Vaudeville, but thanks to Gondinet's intercession, in September 1878 it was accepted by Montigny for the Gymnase, where it opened as part of a spectacle coupé on 15 November and ran for three weeks.<sup>6</sup>

La Navette received a fairly mixed reaction in the press, but the major reviewers were almost unanimous in their sharp disapproval of the play's moral tone. The slight and simple story involved a kept woman and her succession of protectors. The cocotte had frequently been featured on the French stage before, of course,<sup>7</sup> but what shocked the Sarceys and the Vitus was that the immorality of her way of life was here presented simply for what it was, without being offset by any hint that she must somehow pay for her sins, nor mitigated by some redeeming quality, as in La Dame aux camélias.

Given Becque's association with theatrical realism, the

most immediately striking aspect of the comedy is its patent artificiality, apparent in its plot, characters, dialogue, dramaturgy, and even in the fact that the playwright has whimsically given all the characters names beginning with "A".

The pattern of the plot was perfectly regular. Some time prior to the beginning of the action, Alfred, once Antonia's amant de coeur, had supplanted a predecessor to become her official protector. Unknown to him, she had at once replaced him with a new fancy, Arthur, who in the course of the play would, in his turn, aspire to graduate to the status of amant en titre, his former functions being promptly filled by Armand.

The serial nature of the plot is related to the fact that the characters of Alfred and Arthur are exact duplicates. In the course of the action, we see Arthur turn into Alfred, so to speak, as if obeying some inescapable natural law.

Thus, when Alfred became Antonia's official protector, he began at once to choose her friends:

Ainsi, Antonia et sa mère ne se voyaient plus depuis longtemps, ma première pensée a été de les réconcilier. (ii)

Within minutes of replacing Alfred, Arthur likewise was advising Antonia about the company she should keep, and in particular:

Je te prie, Antonia, pas plus tard que demain, de faire visite à la vieille Mme Crochard et de te réconcilier avec elle. Il n'y a pas de meilleure société pour une femme que celle de sa mère. (vi)

This was simply one example among many of identity of character and situation producing identical behaviour in the two. Becque sometimes underscored their perfect resemblance rather heavily by making them express the same sentiments in

exactly the same words. Alfred, contemplating his lot as Antonia's official lover, concluded: "J'ai fait une bêtise" in giving up "le temps où je n'étais pas seul." (ii) In his turn, Arthur would confess: "Antonia, j'ai fait une bêtise", and regret happier days "Quand je n'étais pas seul." (x)

The device suggests the automata of vaudeville, but perhaps a useful distinction might be made between "virtual" and "literal" repetitions in the play. In the examples cited above, Becque saw fit to make two separate things perfectly identical, but very often, too, he was content to demonstrate simply a very close similarity, and such instances, coming more within the limits of acceptable coincidence, probably seem much less mechanical.<sup>8</sup>

Besides the symmetries of plot and congruities of character and dialogue, there was another kind of artificiality very evident in La Navette: Becque resorted to received stage conventions as readily as any Scribe or Legouvé. Much of the exposition was conveyed quite baldly in Alfred's long soliloquy which formed the second scene. The following scene also ended with Antonia talking to herself aloud, scene v began and ended in soliloquy, and short monologues prefaced scenes vii and viii.

Becque likewise made free use of asides in the play. They ranged from those which were functional:

Adèle - Bien, madame. (A part) Je vais toujours mettre la lettre du petit sur cette table, madame l'ouvrira en la voyant, (v)

which clarified a motive, to asides which were gratuitous gestures of complicity with the audience, a sort of verbal wink, as in:

Arthur - J'espère bien, Antonia, que vous ne me rendrez pas ridicule?

Antonia (à part) - Non, je me gênerai. (vi)

The same effect could obviously have been obtained by a facial expression instead. The playwright's preference for an aside makes it clear that he had no compunction about using such stagy techniques.

In various ways, too, the standards of verisimilitude observed were those of stage convention rather than those of the real world. Antonia's soliloquy, immediately after Arthur's exit at the end of scene iv, was interrupted by Adèle with a letter, just delivered by messenger, from the same Arthur. Even assuming that the letter was ready in his pocket when he left, the elapsed period (just under one minute of real time) was hardly enough to leave the house, find a commissionaire and have it delivered. Besides, as Antonia herself wondered: "Qu'est-ce qui l'empêchait de parler plutôt que d'écrire?" The answer was never made clear, in fact, and it seems that Becque arbitrarily bundled Arthur off stage for his own purposes.

There was little sign, then, in La Navette of that realism later associated with Becque's name, even though the play was actually written after Les Corbeaux. In its essentials, the plot was of the vaudevillesque kind a Gandillot or a Feydeau might use, with its rival lovers playing Box-and-Cox in Antonia's apartment, and the stylization even extended in some degree to the character drawing.

Armand, it is true, differed from his rivals in being more or less a match for Antonia, probably because for him she represented only an adventure, so that he was still detached enough to laugh at the situation when turned out at the end. Alfred and Arthur though were literally inter-

changeable, indistinguishably stupid and pompous. They conveyed the impression that their anxiety to be Antonia's sole and avowed lover was less a matter of plain sexual jealousy than the sign of a stuffy and proprietorial vanity, given symbolic expression by Arthur in scene vi:

Un mot à propos d'Adèle. Qu'elle quitte ces habitudes de familiarité qu'elle a prises avec moi. Elle m'appelle M. Arthur et quelquefois Arthur tout court. Qu'elle dise monsieur, je suis le monsieur maintenant, qu'elle dise monsieur.

Basically, Alfred and Arthur were both still the Labichean bourgeois, marginally less grandiloquent than Pomadour, perhaps, but cut from the same cloth. It was only in the choice of the details which revealed their meanness, pretentiousness and nullity that Becque's individuality showed itself somewhat.

Labiche could not have created Antonia, however, nor could Courteline or Renard, say, and it was perhaps only in his later plays that Feydeau presented young women so sharply and ungallantly as this. Antonia was also stupid, perhaps, certainly frivolous, but cunning, and her unremitting selfishness was as formidable as a force of nature. Unmistakably, she was the first draft of Clotilde, in La Parisienne, though Clotilde and the play in which she appeared would be richer and subtler. For although La Navette was to enter the repertory of the Comédie-Française, it was essentially a fairly slight, subacid vaudeville.

Staged between La Navette and La Parisienne, on 1 January 1880 at the Gymnase, Les Honnêtes femmes has often been seen as offsetting the very negative way in which those two plays depicted women. For there was scarce a trace of irony in the title: Mme Chevalier and Geneviève were very nearly as

genuine and virtuous as they appeared to be.

Once again, the intrigue was of the simplest. Pursued by the attentions of Lambert, an aimless bachelor of thirty, the charming Mme Chevalier managed adroitly to side-step his advances and propel him forcefully in the direction of marriage with Geneviève, the niece of an old friend.

The comedy could hardly have been more different from the previous one in tone. In La Navette all the characters had been more or less unlikeable; in Les Honnêtes femmes, none were really unpleasant. Even the would-be seducer Lambert was not vicious but simply immature and bored. Geneviève was an unaffected, alert and warm-hearted girl, while Mme Chevalier was simply compounded of virtues: a staunch wife, a solicitous mother, an excellent housekeeper, a generous friend, a good-natured, attractive and sensible woman.

In fact, instead of its being the work of the pessimistic Becque, one might easily take Les Honnêtes femmes for one of Pailleron's comedies. Besides its sunny outlook, already mentioned, other points of contact might be instanced. Geneviève was a girl after the Pailleron style - wholesome without primness or bashfulness, free-spoken but not brash, inexperienced yet observant. Mme Chevalier's poise and conversational skill, and even certain foibles like her curiosity and absorbing relish for match-making, were traits often found in Pailleron's women characters. Indeed, Mme Chevalier bore a special resemblance to one of Pailleron's heroines in particular, the Mme d'Hailly of L'Autre motif, which had been created in 1872. Like Mme Chevalier, she was an honourable woman without a husband's protection who was

obliged to use her wits to stave off the dubious attentions of prowling admirers.

It was a slender plot, built around a single reversal, and that was achieved by mere speed and surprise rather than by any ingenious stratagem, so the play was reliant for its interest on the dialogue to some extent but above all on the characterization. This was subtler than might at first have appeared. The title did hide a very slight irony after all, for the comedy showed that Mme Chevalier could be both a thoroughly good woman and devious, manipulative and coquettish. She was probably well aware of Lambert's interest in her before he declared himself, and both enjoyed it and played up to it. There can be little doubt that in scene ix she deliberately used herself as bait.

It has been felt too that her close questioning of Lambert about cocottes was a dubious choice of conversation in their circumstances, and the sign of an unhealthy curiosity:

Pourquoi Mlle Esther ne compte-t-elle pas?  
Dites. Dites-moi, ça ne fait rien. (Il se lève et lui parle à l'oreille) Vraiment!  
Tout le monde! Je la plains, alors, la pauvre enfant! (ii)

This was another of Becque's plays in which women were shown in control of men, depicted as stupid, weak and conceited. Much of the humour came from the alternation in Lambert of pretentious swagger and piteous deflation, as he imagined himself encouraged or rebuffed. On the other hand, when Mme Chevalier suddenly made herself extremely amiable, a stage-direction showed the bold predator comically disconcerted: "Elle se rapproche de lui avec amitié; il se recule avec une épouvante comique." (ix)

It is not clear why Maurice Descotes should have written

of the play:

Il ne saurait être question de comique, mais  
plutôt d'un certain charme qui naît de  
l'habileté du manège, de la fatuité déçue  
de Lambert (scène 9), du choc des répliques...<sup>9</sup>

Les Honnêtes femmes did have such a charm - it would seem an  
ideal comédie de salon - but to deny that the play is truly  
comic in some sense appears puzzling. Much depends on one's  
conception of the comic, no doubt, but surely anyone who  
cannot find it in

- Vous les connaissez, ses enfants, vous avez joué  
avec eux, des amours.
- Oui. J'ai aperçu dernièrement Mlle Berthe qui don-  
nait une raclée à son frère.
- Elle le bat comme plâtre. Deux amours! (vii)

or in

La jeune femme est charmante, je la vois mieux  
maintenant, elle a beaucoup de choses pour elle;  
mais, si je l'épouse, je serai marié, n'est-ce  
pas? (ix)

or else in

- Et puis une éducation de province, avec mes  
habitudes un peu passionnées...
- Le mariage vous calmera. Il paraît que c'est son  
office, (ix)

or even in

Je veux bien que le mariage soit préférable à l'amour,  
mais se présenter pour l'un et être renvoyé à l'autre,  
il n'y a rien de plus désagréable, (ix)

must be hard to please.

Les Honnêtes femmes is not considered one of Becque's  
major works, being inferior in importance not only to Les  
Corbeaux and La Parisienne but to La Navette as well. This  
may be due partly to its subject matter, an anecdote of little  
consequence, and partly to the fact that there was little  
trace in it of the distinctive accent for which the playwright



is chiefly valued. It was a conventional little piece, almost a proverbe, which unlike Becque's other comedies aroused no ire - and very little interest - in 1880. On the other hand, it might be said that, slight as it may have been, the comedy had at least the technical merit of matching content with an apt and adequate form.

Becque's celebrated comédie en quatre actes, Les Corbeaux was created after Les Honnêtes femmes, in 1882, but it had been written several years previously: exactly when is still unsure, but certainly by about 1876, before La Navette.<sup>10</sup> After years of doggedly trying to find a theatre which would stage the play, Becque was helped by his publisher Stock and by Edouard Thierry to get it considered by the Comédie-Française, where it was accepted (after modifications had been made) in 1881. There was still a trying wait ahead for the playwright and some friction between him and the company, but eventually Les Corbeaux was put into rehearsal at the start of the 1882-83 season.

In spite of the dramatist's reluctance, several changes were made to the text during the rehearsals under pressure from Perrin and the actors; and after the générale on 13 September 1882, further modifications were made, some of them extensive and significant. Largely on Coquelin's insistence, Becque cut Act I scene xii, in which Gaston Vigneron, dressed in his father's dressing-gown, playfully caricatured him. It was felt that the revelation in the next scene that his father had died would make Gaston's joke appear in such bad taste that the audience would be offended.

Much the most serious change, though, was that made to the ending by the cutting of the two final scenes (IV, ix & x).

This significantly altered the distinctive spirit and dramaturgy of Becque's play. It now ended very conventionally, with a wedding being announced, "Comme s'il s'agissait d'une pochade",<sup>11</sup> as Arnaoutovitch commented scornfully, and rounding off the action all too neatly. Becque's original version, straggling on a few minutes after the obvious stopping-point, was much more in keeping with the logic of the play. Several critics have particularly deplored the loss of Teissier's ironical curtain-lines: "Vous êtes entourées de fripons, mon enfant, depuis la mort de votre père. Allons retrouver votre famille." (IV, x)

Most of the changes were made with the purpose of mitigating the impression of harshness and cruelty which the action was expected to make on the audience. Despite this, Coquelin, playing Merckens, and Mme Lloyd, as Mme de Saint Genis, exaggerated the hardness and cynicism of their roles, and it would seem that Becque, responsible for his own mise en scène,<sup>12</sup> was unable to prevent this distortion of his characters.

In general, though, it was a somewhat softened as a truncated version of Les Corbeaux which was performed at the premiere on 14 September. Nevertheless, the precautions taken were not enough to avoid a gathering indignation in the first night audience. The picture of happy family life occupying the first act naturally offended no one, and the dignity shown in adversity by Mme Vigneron (well played by Pauline Granger) carried off the second act. But as the creditors and Mme de Saint Genis began to show themselves unrelievedly self-interested, vicious and hard-hearted, the spectators grew restive. There were audible protests in

Act III scene viii when Teissier put his dishonourable proposition to Marie, stilled however when Blanche Barretta as Marie rejected him with noble anger. It was in scene xi that the storm was unleashed, the highly dramatic scene in which Mme de Saint Genis broke off the match between her son and the girl he had seduced. Forcing the harshness and cruelty of her role, Marie Lloyd bullied and insulted the unfortunate Blanche until the audience rose up in indignation so vehement that the unnerved actress fled the stage without being able to utter her exit line.<sup>13</sup> Suzanne Reichemberg's fine display of grief won back the sympathy of the spectators, and the worst was over. During the final act, discontent did not rise above a grumbling resentment at the unrelenting nastiness of it all.

It should be made clear that by no means all of the audience were vocally hostile to the performance. The protests were answered by spirited applause from a band of determined supporters, and at the final curtain the balance of opinion was probably in the play's favour. When the author's name was announced at the end according to custom, it was well received. The press was mixed but not too damning (with none of the ferocity which had been unleashed on La Navette, for instance), and the play had an honourable run of eighteen performances.<sup>14</sup> The battle of Les Corbeaux was won, no doubt; but it had been a battle.

Although not quite as rowdy a scandal as the creation of Ubu roi, the premiere of Becque's play was a phenomenon of a rather similar kind, because Les Corbeaux also offended a good many of its audience by its unpleasant content while at the same time it disconcerted their preconceptions about dramatic form. Like Jarry's play, also, its performance

appears now to have been one of the theatrical landmarks of the period. In fact as early as 1897, on the occasion of a mediocre revival at the Odéon, Jules Lemaître hazarded the prophecy:

Les Corbeaux, selon toute apparence, marqueront une date dans l'histoire de notre théâtre, la première date importante depuis celle de la Dame aux camélias.<sup>15</sup>

It would perhaps be appropriate to consider the part played by the performance in the play's initial reception. Some contemporary reviewers judged that Les Corbeaux had been saved by its actors. Arnaoutovitch was also satisfied that they had given a good account of the play; but this is not the view generally taken by modern commentators. Mme Dussane, who can hardly be suspected of any bias against the Comédie-Française, thought that despite their best efforts and good will (Coquelin should perhaps be excepted), the actors were not fitted by their training or customary style for what Becque's comedy required of them.<sup>16</sup> The greater part of their habitual repertory was marked by its literary elegance and brilliance, which it was their task to display fittingly. Becque's style too was literary, in its way: he did not aim to transcribe familiar and even argotique speech faithfully, as the young Naturalists did. In accordance with his own conception of realism, he endeavoured rather to pitch his stage speech in that register of the written language which came closest to the spoken. In doing so, he had to renounce much that was attractive and rhetorically effective, which the Comédie's actors could have presented expertly.

Becque's characters could be articulate enough, but their thought was expressed thoroughly rather than eloquently, in the main. The style of his dialogue was sometimes forceful

in its bluntness or its irony, but besides having the rather heavy, cold, graceless quality of Becque's own natural style, it was often deliberately made grey, flat and meagre to fit it to the lack-lustre, limited characters who were to speak it.

However, Becque was rarely absolutely consistent with himself in his artistic expression, and even in Les Corbeaux there were occasional signs of an insidious temptation to "write finely". Even granting that the romanesque Blanche spoke more bookishly than her sisters, a speech such as this:

Serait-ce possible qu'un tout jeune homme,  
épris comme il le dit, aimé comme il le sait,  
plutôt que de sacrifier ses intérêts, commît  
une infamie! (II, v),

showed a degree of literary, indeed rhetorical artifice which jars in its context (and which, incidentally, was no better for being uttered in the privacy of an aside). Becque's orotund première manière again echoed briefly in Blanche's words towards the end of the scene: "Oh! pardon, pardon, chère soeur, pure comme les anges..." which, taken together with the accompanying business, "Elle l'embrasse passionément", came uncomfortably close to the conventionality of Michel Pauper, if not that of the roman-feuilleton.

Act III scene ii began with a brief passage of quick-fire "catechism" dialogue after the manner of Dumas fils:

Teissier - Qu'est-ce que j'ai dit à table?

Marie - Différentes choses.

Teissier - Qui portaient?

Marie - Sur la vie en général.

Teissier - A-t-on parlé de vos affaires?

Marie - Il n'en a pas été question.

The artificiality - and indeed superfluity - of this kind of slick exchange was all the more apparent for its contrast

with the surrounding dialogue, like Teissier's cross-examination of Judith about Marie a few minutes later, almost as rapid but functional. This, one would like to think, was the "real" Becque, the master who wrote the admirable scene which followed (III, iii), where every line seems convincing and true.

Les Corbeaux was in fact more consistently realistic than Becque's previously-produced plays at the level of dialogue and characterization, yet once again the dramaturgy resorted fairly freely to the artificial stage conventions.<sup>17</sup> He still used asides, and not all of them were indispensable:

Blanche - Serait-ce le dernier des hommes, il faut maintenant que je l'épouse.

Marie (à part) - Elle souffre, la pauvre enfant, et elle déraisonne.

Blanche (à part) - Ah! quelle faute nous avons commise! Quelle faute! (II, v)

He had ready recourse to soliloquy also, as in Act III scene x.

The technique of Les Corbeaux had other features, though, which were unlike Becque's practices in his other plays. For one thing, the playwright made frequent and effective use of silences in this play, the stage directions calling for Pause, Silence or Un temps. The stage directions also suggest that more attention was given to the significance of moves and groupings. The degree of closeness of one character to another was often strikingly meaningful.

In Les Corbeaux, Becque also employed what might be termed "open" stage-directions, those which gave the actor only a general notion of what was required: Changement de ton occurs several times, for instance, without specifying further the nature of the change. Similarly, in Act IV scene viii, the dramatist noted: "Bourdon répond par un geste

significatif", while in Act II scene ix, Lefort repeatedly illustrated his speeches "avec une pantomime comique." In such cases, the exact gesture used was apparently left to the discretion of the actor.

These mannerisms, as one might call them, were curiously specific to the writing of Les Corbeaux. They did not occur (at least in any nearly comparable degree) in those plays written immediately before or after it, even though they seem for the most part to represent a technical advance, an enhancement of the theatrical qualities of Becque's writing. In La Parisienne, Lafont would be given a characteristic, indecisive pattern of movement, "S'éloignant puis revenant", but otherwise the techniques explored in Les Corbeaux were not used again, for some reason.

In several respects, then, Les Corbeaux was an admirable achievement, even though it was not an amiable play - a pièce gringante, to use Anouilh's apt term. To sum up its importance, it would be hard to better what Jules Lemaître wrote of it: "Les Corbeaux ont le double mérite de 'marquer une date' et d'être une comédie de première ordre."<sup>18</sup>

Becque's reputation as a dramatist rests on Les Corbeaux and La Parisienne. The historical importance of Les Corbeaux has helped to make it the better-known of the two, but many of Becque's admirers have considered that his masterpiece was La Parisienne, ignoring the playwright's own, apparently cool appraisal of the play:

Eh, mon Dieu, la Parisienne, c'est une fantaisie qu'il est agréable d'avoir faite pour montrer aux gens d'esprit qu'on n'est pas plus bête qu'eux.

His nonchalance was belied by the time he spent on the comedy which was to follow Les Corbeaux.

If Les Corbeaux did not exactly bring Becque popular success, at least it won him a certain respect as a dramatist from a public wider than those loyal Naturalists whose support he accepted in a decidedly ambivalent spirit.

His next comedy was apparently already in hand by 1882, but it underwent painstaking reworking and polishing for some two years before being submitted for production. Becque was very abashed when the Comédie-Française rejected La Parisienne, deterred by the memory of the lively premiere of Les Corbeaux, according to Mme Dussane.<sup>19</sup> Deslandes of the Variétés also declined to mount the new comedy, so it was reluctantly entrusted to Samuel, who had only recently taken over the Théâtre de la Renaissance. Prepared in less than a month and with something of a scratch cast, La Parisienne was created at the Renaissance on 7 February 1885, and ran until 16 March, often accompanied on the bill by La Navette or Les Honnêtes femmes.

The public's response to La Parisienne was excellent from the first, but a section of the press affected disapproval of its "immorality", and some critics were taken aback by the exiguity of the plot.

It has often been said that La Parisienne was a three-act expansion of La Navette, and it is true that both plays were dominated by the female lead role, both turned on multiple and simultaneous infidelities and the jealousy ensuing from them, and both were structured on the same pattern, of a disruption in a woman's relations with her lover, followed at the end by a return to the status quo.

J.J. Weiss was expressing the same sentiment as several of his colleagues when he wrote in the Débats (16 February):



"Dans La Parisienne, nous n'avons rien, ni sujet, ni conduite, ni épisode saillant, ni commencement, ni crise, ni dénouement..." Maurice Descotes has persuasively argued that the "undramatic" character of the action was a fitting and necessary consequence of the fact that the comedy was about essentially "undramatic" people, endeavouring at all costs to avert "dramatic" situations.<sup>20</sup>

In circumstances where it was in everyone's interest to avoid any fundamental changes or real conflict, the only slight inflection of the flat plot-line resulted from a sudden loss of self-control by Clotilde (II, ix), exasperated simultaneously by the ill-natured dejection of her husband Du Mesnil, the tiresomely persistent (and well-founded) suspicions of her jealous lover Lafont, and her irritation at being delayed by her moping men-folk from going to an assignation with Simpson, another lover. Clotilde's break with Lafont at the end of the second act was the best the plot had to offer by way of a crise, and the dénouement was simply her taking him back again (III, vi).

There was, to be sure, a token sub-plot. Clotilde's new lover Simpson was able to get her husband the ministry post he coveted, but soon after broke off their affair by leaving Paris. It was hardly an absorbing story to start with and it was made even slighter by its treatment. Becque showed only Du Mesnil's ambition and eventual satisfaction, and the fairly composed leave-taking of Clotilde and Simpson (who did not otherwise appear in the play): all the rest was sketched in by passing references and inference.

With a plot as scanty as this, the eventual outcome mattered even less to the audience than that of Les Corbeaux -

who could have cared what became of Lafont? - and interest focussed entirely on the characters. At first sight, these might have appeared much more flat and stylized than Teissier and the varied Vigneron family, simply the routine trio of stock types found in dozens of comedies about adultery; but on closer inspection they emerged as subtler than they seemed, even enigmatic.

Becque composed the roles in such a way as to accommodate quite different interpretations. Was Du Mesnil as naïve about his wife as he appeared to be; or as naïve as he chose to be? The text allowed the supposition that without being an outright witto he had a vague intuition about Clotilde's behaviour which he was very careful to protect against verification. That is, he may have shared - without ever admitting it to himself - the sentiment expressed in Lafont's anguished reproach: "Il fallait me tromper délicatement, sans que je le voie et sans me le dire." (II, ix) Or, of course, he may have been simply the gullible, empty fool he seemed.

Clotilde's character was just as equivocal. Obviously, she knew at least that some of the things she did had to be hidden from her husband and Lafont, but it was not made clear that she was fully aware of the immorality of her behaviour. As successive actresses have shown,<sup>21</sup> many of the enormities she uttered so blandly could equally well be taken as hypocrisy, or cynicism, or unconscious amorality, and on balance, the last hypothesis seems the most probable, as well as being the one which most enriches Becque's comedy.

The opening scene began very dramatically, in the midst of what was unmistakeably one of those domestic quarrels, so familiar in the theatre of the time, between flighty wife and

jealous husband, which rose to its climax in the fervent entreaty:

- Ne vous laissez pas aller à ce goût des aventures, qui fait aujourd'hui tant de victimes. Résistez, Clotilde, résistez. En me restant fidèle, vous restez digne et honorable; le jour où vous me tromperiez...

- Prenez garde, voilà mon mari. (I, i)

The uproarious laughter which greeted this line was largely a sign of the public's surprise, all the greater because at that time the "God-like spectator"<sup>22</sup> was less used to being tricked:

L'effet de surprise, si souvent utilisé depuis Becque par les dramaturges, est avec La Parisienne dans toute sa nouveauté.<sup>23</sup>

By placing the Lover in the traditional role of the Husband as defender of chastity and honour against aventures, Becque gave notice from the outset that his comedy was to be organized around the topos of "the World Upside-Down". This initial displacement of the moral fiducial point resulted quite naturally in the paradoxical and ironical situations and dialogue which filled the play: "Je ne connais pas de comédie plus continument ni plus naturellement ironique que La Parisienne," observed Jules Lemaître.<sup>24</sup>

From this unconventional start, La Parisienne gradually built up a picture of society in the idiosyncratic perspective of Clotilde's vision, an unconscious travesty of the accepted maxims of society. She felt, for instance, that the mere fact that one was habitually unfaithful was no excuse for raffishness in one's general standards of conduct:

...Je suis une bonne réactionnaire. J'aime l'ordre, la tranquillité, les principes bien établis. Je veux que les églises soient ouvertes, s'il me prend l'envie d'y faire un tour. (I, iii)

The principles she spoke of were old-fashioned, clear-cut and peremptory. She reproached Lafont for being tainted with modern laxity:

Vous êtes libre penseur! Je crois que vous vous entendriez très bien avec une maîtresse qui n'aurait pas de religion, quelle horreur! (I, iii)

Unlike the Antonia of La Navette, she had a sort of sense of fairness. It seemed only just to her that the cuckold should be entitled to the assiduous attention of his wife and her lover, by way of compensation:

Clotilde - Est-ce que je n'ai pas un mari, dont je dépends entièrement, et qui doit me trouver là toutes les fois qu'il le désire? C'est bien le moins, vous l'avouerez. Voilà encore une bien grande faute de votre part et que vous vous éviteriez, si vous me connaissiez mieux.

Lafont - Qu'est-ce que vous me reprochez?

Clotilde - Vous n'aimez pas mon mari! (III, vi)

She had a peculiar but definite idea of gentlemanly conduct: "...Quand la femme est véritablement coupable, un galant homme sait ce qu'il lui reste à faire, il la quitte... ou il se tait." (II, v) As a matter of fact, it was her opinion that a woman's transgression entitled her to particular respect: "Quand un homme a vu à une femme un bout de sa chemise, cette femme est sacrée pour lui, sacrée!" (II, v) However warped and funny they were, all these maxims were mots de situation in their context, because they could be seen as reasonable and sincere, once given the essential, consistent distortion of Clotilde's outlook.

The ironies in La Parisienne were more organic than those in Les Corbeaux, therefore, and on that account they were in a sense less obtrusive, even though more numerous; and because of the difference in genre between the two plays,

the effect of the irony was different:

Nei Corbeaux quei motti appesantivano a volte, accusavano la durezza, ribadivano la visione amara. Tanto più frequente nella Parisienne, la maniera incisiva non pesa, quasi non si avverte, o sembra tutta naturale nel giuoco spassoso e serrato. Una 'fantasia' l'ha chiamata l'autore, e noi possiamo accettare senz'altro la definizione,<sup>25</sup>

wrote Vittorio Lugli, who himself considered the play close to a vaudeville in its form, and all the more effective for it.<sup>26</sup> The lighter genre of La Parisienne provided a more appropriate context than the starkness and pathos of Les Corbeaux for ironic perceptions which nevertheless probed just as deeply into personal and social morality.

The question of dramatic form is central to any attempt to sum up Becque's achievements and his place in the development of French comedy. His incomplete success in solving the problem was one of the main limitations on the success of his own work, and the chief reason why the decisive revolution in the French theatre had to wait for Antoine and others.

Vittorio Lugli has pointed out that when Becque became attracted to the theatre, it was to the theatre of Dumas fils, Augier, Sardou ... and even Labiche:<sup>27</sup> "Questo è il teatro che Becque cerca ed ama, da cui muove, che non pensa di combattere, di negare."<sup>28</sup> As his work developed, Becque certainly modified the received model, but piecemeal, creating the unresolved inconsistencies noted above by trying to put new wine into old bottles.

La Navette and Les Honnêtes femmes were each in its own way stylized to some extent, which lessened the tension between content and form. That tension showed itself most acutely in Les Corbeaux, where conventional dramaturgy was inadequately adapted to basically realistic characterization

and dialogue. It is largely for this reason that many critics have preferred the more successful synthesis achieved in La Parisienne, despite the power and incisiveness of Les Corbeaux.

It is also one of the reasons why it seems undesirable to try to assimilate Becque to the Naturalist theatre, as is so often done. The Naturalists generally solved the formal problem by a more radical renunciation of the existing dramatic model.

There were other, really substantial points of divergence between Becque and the Naturalists proper, not least their views on the nature of art and its relation to reality. By his preoccupation with general human truth, Becque was closer to the neo-classical moralistes than he was to the Naturalists' concern with the particular and the topical;<sup>29</sup> and their "scientific" pretensions had no place in his conception of literature.

Yet though his realism was not their Naturalism, the dramatists grouped around the Théâtre-Libre were not wrong in seeing Becque as a precursor. The style he developed, écrit but not rhetorical, offered a new standard of stage diction, and his brave persistence in telling audiences wry and unpleasant home-truths set a precedent which was not lost on later dramatists.

# Henry Becque: Footnotes

1. His attacks on Sarcey, for example, were disconcertingly violent. See his Souvenirs d'un auteur dramatique (In Oeuvres complètes, 6, 244-46).
2. Oeuvres complètes, 7, 139.
3. Thus Georges Roussel's report (in Art et Critique, 11, October 1890) on the opening of the Théâtre Mixte on 5 October noted that Louis Germain's inaugural speech contained a tribute to Becque, which was warmly applauded.
4. Before turning to literature for a very meagre living, Becque had held a variety of jobs.
5. Henry Becque et son théâtre, 101.
6. The 1966 edition of Harvey & Heseltine's Oxford Companion to French Literature gave the date as 1879; this was incorrect.
7. "It was about the year 1850, as the late M. Emile <sic> Caro has shown in his Etudes Morales, that the courtesan became a fashionable character on the French Stage". (Andrew de Ternant, "The Courtesan on the French Stage", q.v.) See also Sidney D. Braun, The 'Courtisane' in the French Theatre from Hugo to Becque.
8. Descotes (op. cit., 130) has argued: "Ce comique-là n'est pas purement mécanique, puisqu'il n'est pas fondé sur la simple répétition: la répétition n'a de valeur que dans la mesure où elle exprime une vérité humaine." Purement and simple would seem to be the key words in this contention.
9. Descotes, op. cit., 135.
10. See: Arnaoutovitch, 1, 29 & 3, 573ff; E. Bouvier, "La Date de la composition des Corbeaux", 118; Descotes, op. cit., 106; S.I. Lockerie's "Introduction" to his edition of Les Corbeaux, L., Harrap, 1962, 9-10.
11. Arnaoutovitch, 3, 41.
12. In association with Delaunay.
13. See Arnaoutovitch, 3, 44 & 48-49; Dussane, La Comédie-Française, 57. Gaiffe gave a different explanation of the incident: "Les spectateurs étaient indignés de voir paraître sur le théâtre une jeune fille qui s'était donnée à son fiancé." (245) The reviews do not suggest this.
14. The old myth that it received only three performances was finally laid to rest by Arnaoutovitch.
15. Lemaître, Impressions, 10, 303.

16. La Comédie-Française, 56-67.
17. Lockerbie (op. cit., 27) took a contrary view.
18. Lemaître, op. cit., 304.
19. Dussane, op. cit., 57.
20. Descotes, op. cit., 147.
21. "La place laissée ici à l'interprétation de l'actrice est énorme." (Descotes, op. cit., 152). See Gaiffe, 243, Note 1.
22. The term was coined by William Archer in an article in the Morning Leader, 24 September 1910.
23. Descotes, op. cit., 148. He went on to say that the effect was "repris de la première scène de La Navette," but nothing similar occurs there. The closest parallel seems to be the stage direction ending the second scene, which suddenly reveals that Antonia has a second lover.
24. Impressions, 3, 226.
25. Jules Renard ed altri amici, 40.
26. Ibid., 39-41.
27. Becque had a prejudice against Labiche. There was a close similarity between the plots of Le Plus heureux des trois and La Parisienne, however.
28. Lugli, op. cit., 30. In his Souvenirs, 1 (15 November 1890), Antoine questioned Becque's choice of actors for a revival of La Parisienne, observing: "...Attardé au théâtre brillant de Dumas, il rêve, pour ses bons-hommes si humains et parfois si douloureux comme l'amant de Clotilde, des acteurs en dehors, habiles à flatter le goût du public pour le théâtre aimable et léger."
29. See Lugli, op. cit., 34. Lugli's essay was entitled "Un classico immediato: Becque." Ashley Dukes wrote of Becque "He had nothing to say about social movements or currents of thought (being possibly even sceptical of their value), but he had a good deal to say about husbands, wives, lovers and other simple phenomena of human nature, and said it with distinction." (The Youngest Drama, 14).



THE COMEDIE ROSSE

It could probably be maintained that Petronius's tale of the matron of Ephesus was one of the earliest comédies rosses and that the genre has existed at least intermittently ever since; but it was in France, and during the period under consideration here, that plays of this kind were written in such numbers as to constitute a theatrical phenomenon, distinct and significant enough to warrant a name.

It is usually accepted that the comédie rosse was derived from Becque's bitter comedies La Navette, Les Corbeaux and La Parisienne. In an essay on Georges Ancey, one of the playwrights chiefly associated with the comédie rosse, F.A. Taylor wrote:

It may well be that Henri Becque's mature work gave Ancey, and not only Ancey but the whole of Ancey's generation, a different view of life and art. <sup>1</sup>

Basically, rosserie was an exaggerated form of Becque's caustic realism. Augustin Filon's much-quoted description in De Dumas à Rostand has apparently become the standard definition:

La rosserie est une sorte d'ingénuité vicieuse, l'état d'âme des gens qui n'ont jamais eu de sens moral et qui vivent dans l'impureté ou dans l'injustice comme le poisson dans l'eau; une quiétude enfantine et paradisiaque dans la corruption, à travers laquelle on pressent une sorte d'âge d'or à rebours où tous nos principes auraient la tête en bas et où, comme dit le Satan de Milton, le mal serait le bien. <sup>2</sup>

Filon's formulation has been so widely adopted that it is perhaps too late now to demur; but it seems imprecise in an important particular. What in practice characterizes comédie rosse is not so much the total turpitude of the

characters - it is not helpful to call Le Légataire universel a comédie rosse, for instance - as the rosserie of the playwright towards his public, whose cherished moral and social values he sardonically offends.

Daniel Gerould's description therefore seems much more satisfactory:

Comédie rosse takes a sardonic pleasure in undermining the high ideals of traditional religious morality by showing how harsh economic facts and biological drives render those ideals hollow and inoperative. Without comment or condemnation - and only the trace of an ironic sneer - the playwright allows the bare truth to expose the falsity of society's hypocritical pretensions. <sup>3</sup>

All the principal constituents of the concept are present in this account. Comédie rosse was essentially iconoclastic, bent on destroying valued beliefs, but it differed from plain scepticism in that it was highly aggressive, actively seeking to be offensive. Yet it was a characteristic of the style that it masked its aggression and Schadenfreude behind an air of detachment, uttering its enormities à froid, as if unaware of the shock, anger and revulsion it provoked.

This was the essence of the comédie rosse: what Filon described was not rosserie, but the means by which the playwright perpetrated rosserie on his public, a jeering, pessimistic depiction of human motives and behaviour as unrelievedly mean-spirited and abject behind a façade of respectability.

The writers of comédies rosses may have maintained that their unpleasant characters and situations were true to life, and claimed that they were simply allowing "the bare truth to expose the falsity of society's hypocritical pretensions", but audiences and critics refused to accept that their bare truth was the whole truth. It was generally felt that a

cynical bias was a distortion of reality like any other, or as Jules Lemaître so neatly expressed it: "Il peut y avoir quelque chose d'aussi faux, à sa manière, qu'une berquinade, c'est une becquinade."<sup>4</sup>

While the usual objection to réalisme rosse was (and has remained) that it was not realism if it took no account of such decency as did exist in real life, Lemaître questioned the verisimilitude of comédie rosse on rather different grounds. In a review of Ancey's five-act comedy L'Ecole des veufs, created at the Théâtre-Libre on 27 November 1889,<sup>5</sup> he wrote:

Je ne lui reproche point d'avoir éliminé de ses peintures la vertu, car, après tout, la vertu est souvent absente des choses humaines; je lui reproche d'avoir éliminé l'hypocrisie.<sup>6</sup>

He was referring to Ancey's practice (shared by other writers of comédies rosses) of making his characters convict themselves out of their own mouths, lending them a candour about their own baseness which was quite unlikelike.

Le petit arrangement de famille des deux Mirelet me paraît possible, je l'ai dit. Mais les discussions précises, les marchandages explicites d'où sort cet arrangement, me paraissent presque impossibles, du moins dans le milieu social où M. Ancey nous fait pénétrer.<sup>7</sup>

F.W. Chandler was apparently trying to rebut this argument when he wrote in The Contemporary Drama of France (page 83): "But the society that Ancey satirized was precisely that which had rejected all pretenses." This is not so; nor is it logical, for as we saw earlier, the comédie rosse was founded on the postulate that society had "hypocritical pretensions" which needed to be stripped away.<sup>8</sup>

It is truer to say that in many comédies rosses the characters were frank and hypocritical by turns, sometimes betraying

their true, disreputable motives in mots de nature of uncommon candour, while at other times they were at great pains to preserve an appearance of uprightness and respectability.

Furthermore, if they were comic, it was not usually on account of their misbehaviour in itself; rather it was because of their efforts to persist in moral pretensions which the circumstances had rendered untenable. For example, in Ancey's first play, Monsieur Lamblin, staged by the Théâtre-Libre on 15 June 1888, what gave the ending its wryness was the attempt by Mme Bail and by Marthe to pretend that nothing untoward had happened, in spite of the shameful compromises they had just accepted. The characters of comédie rosse were not as a rule open and cynical about their moral shortcomings, but tried to hide them, even from themselves as far as they could.

Comédie rosse had its own, rather narrow range of characteristic subjects. Because its true, if unavowed, aim was not simply to dissent, nor even to convert others, but to give offence, the ideals it attacked were not coolly intellectual convictions, but issues which strongly touched the emotions of the public. Above all, its province was flouting the received taboos of society. Consequently the bulk of comédie rosse involved the sexual misdemeanours which so preoccupied the French at that time, though there were also some which derided the ideals of justice and loyalty or the conventional pieties surrounding death. Religion was not usually a major target, though it might occasionally appear as a subsidiary element. Thus Ancey had a fondness for making his characters profess to be practising Christians

shortly before undertaking some vile course of action.

One type of unconventional sexual conduct that the authors of comédie rosse seemed to find especially piquant was that of an individual who was conducting affairs with several members of the same household simultaneously. This situation was the basis of Jean Jullien's first play La Sérénade, which caused something of a sensation at the Théâtre-Libre on 23 December 1887, and in which mother and daughter were both the mistress of the family tutor.<sup>9</sup> It was also the idea behind Méténier and Dubut de Laforest's aptly-titled La Bonne à tout faire, a four-act comedy produced at the Variétés on 20 February 1892.

In these instances, those sharing Maxime's or Félicie's favours were unaware of the fact, but another popular situation in comédie rosse was that of the person who knew that his (or her) partner was unfaithful but came meekly to accept things. This was the wife's position in M. Lamblin, and that of the husband in Gaston Salandri's three-act comedy La Rançon (Théâtre-Libre, 30 November 1891).<sup>10</sup> It might be noted that unlike most comedy or farce about adultery, this variety of comédie rosse found male as well as female infidelity useful. This was probably because the injured party was not here being ridiculed for being deceived so much as for being too feeble to do anything decisive about it. Since the real issue was that of moral courage, this was not a situation subject to the normal double standard of sexual morality, according to which a male cuckold was grotesque, while a woman in the same case was unfortunate but unfunny.

A closely related but more general theme was that of

people who considered themselves honourable being gradually induced to turn a blind eye to the turpitude of a relative or close associate by self-interest of some kind. Very often the motive was money. In Maurice Boniface and Edouard Bodin's three-act comedy La Tante Léontine, staged at the Théâtre-Libre on 2 May 1890, Paul's first impulse, on learning that his fiancée's aunt was a cocotte, was to break off the match. But when he realized she was offering her niece a huge dowry, he became Léontine's staunch champion and persuaded her family not to turn from their door "l'ange gardien de la famille". In Romain Coolus' Le Ménage Brésile (Théâtre-Libre, 16 January 1893), the husband's acceptance of his wife's infidelity was all the more debonair because he could blackmail his mother-in-law with the threat of scandal. Fear of a public scandal was, of course, another reason for accepting a dubious or distasteful situation.

Sexual dependence often forced characters to accept ignominious situations. Mirelet, in Ancey's five-act comedy L'Ecole des veufs, staged at the Théâtre-Libre on 27 November 1889, was so terrified of losing his mistress Marguerite altogether that he agreed to her harsh terms for staying with him, even though it meant sharing her with his son. The same dramatist's comedy La Dupe, which the Théâtre-Libre created on 21 December 1891, ended with Adèle agreeing to an assignation with her separated husband (who had deceived, robbed and beaten her) out of sensuality and loneliness.

Loneliness played a major part in Gaston Salandri's one-act comedy Monsieur Chaumont, which the Escholiers performed on 20 May 1892. This play, which bore some

resemblance to Guinon's Seul, put on a couple of months earlier by the Théâtre-Libre, was relatively subtle in its cynicism, leaving much to inference. Chaumont seemed quite easily satisfied with his wife's denial that she was deceiving him with his friend Lannoy, but learning that the affair was common knowledge, he was obliged to send her away. However, the final scenes showed him so miserable in his solitude that there appeared to be every reason to suppose that he would take her back.

Mme Bail's motive for conniving at her son-in-law's infidelity in M. Lamblin was somewhat similar, but was probably perceived by the public as less cogent and hence less excusable than Chaumont's. She was simply afraid that any upset in the marriage might threaten her cosy position in the household. Similarly, in August Germain's La Paix du foyer (Vaudeville, 25 February 1892), when Mme Rivière asked her son-in-law to agree to a reconciliation with his wife while still retaining his mistress, her motive may have been partly to avoid the scandal of divorce, but her initiative was prompted above all by the inconvenience of having her daughter stay with her.

As the examples so far considered suggest, comédie rosse was for the most part an exposure of the greed, lust, selfishness and hypocrisy of the middle classes. However, with the black comedy Le Pendu (6 July 1891) and Mariage d'argent (12 June 1893), another comedy based on the poncif of peasant avarice and hardness, Eugène Bourgeois supplied the Théâtre-Libre with two sardonic paysanneries which were very much in the spirit of comédie rosse.

Particular mention should also be made of Oscar Méténier,

one of the founders of réalisme rosse, and of his deliberately shocking tableaux of the squalid life of the Parisian underworld.<sup>11</sup> Instead of addressing middle-class values directly, Méténier's harsh little plays functioned much like Gay's The Beggar's Opera, in that they offered a grotesque travesty of the behaviour accepted by the public as normal:

The common people in Méténier's plays parody the values of their supposed betters by adapting the precepts taught by the church and state to their own lowly circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

The different nature of Méténier's subject implied a difference in dramatic treatment. In most comédies rosses (Le Ménage Brésil was an exception), the action was geared to showing the actual process of corruption, the hollowing-out of the characters' pretensions, the progressive stages of moral abdication and compromise, whereas in Méténier's plays, where the characters were already at the depths of degradation from the outset, the action was usually more in the nature of a gradual unveiling of their baseness. This was also the case with Paul Ginisty and Jules Guérin's Deux tourtereaux (Théâtre-Libre, 25 February 1890), in which the authors slyly deferred the revelation that the two chief characters were actually vicious criminals confined to a penal colony.

Even from so cursory a survey, it will probably be apparent that as a class comédies rosses were quite unusually lacking in variety. With the important exceptions noted, they concentrated their jibes on the urban middle class. Since they confined themselves to quite a narrow range of topics and situations, their plots tended to repeat one another somewhat. Finally, by definition the tone of the genre was always much the same, with slight variations in



the degree of caricature and fantasy or realism and seriousness, but essentially abrasive and carping.

The monotony of its methodical unpleasantness quite quickly turned the comédie rosse into a tiresome poncif. Wearied of the repetitiveness and predictability of its plots, of its perpetual rumination of the same sour home truths and, above all, of its fixed sneer, audiences began to be as much bored as scandalized by it.

Becque, whose example had inspired the comédie rosse, considered that his young admirers had taken his bitterness too far: "Ils avaient devant eux un danger et ils ne l'ont pas évité. C'est le cynisme."<sup>13</sup> However, he thought their excesses an understandable result of the impact on them of a sudden and heady new theatrical freedom:

Représentez-vous des auteurs jeunes, décidés, débordants, auxquels on ouvrirait un théâtre pour la première fois, et un théâtre où ils pouvaient tout dire.<sup>14</sup>

That theatre was, of course, the Théâtre-Libre, which was so much the home of the form that the expression genre Théâtre-Libre was a common synonym for comédie rosse. From Antoine's point of view, perhaps the association was not an unmixed blessing in the long run:

What Becque bequeathed to the young realists was precisely the genre of the comédie rosse which furnished one of the major sources of material of the Théâtre-Libre, and which eventually grew into a stereotype that led to the decline of the same theatre and the death of naturalism in the drama.<sup>15</sup>

As far as comédie rosse was concerned, its viability depended on the existence of a theatre like Antoine's, and it is no coincidence that the brief heyday of the genre, from about 1887 to around 1893, corresponded very closely with his management of the Théâtre-Libre.

Yet although it appeared to wither as a separate genre after 1893, the comédie rosse did not entirely cease to be. A few were staged after that date, most notably those written by Méténier for his new theatre the Grand-Guignol. More importantly, it has seemed to some theatrical historians that something of the spirit and the practices of the comédie rosse was reintegrated into what might be called the mainstream of comedy. Pierre Voltz has argued that it exerted a strong influence on dramatists such as Porto-Riche, Renard and even Donnay, and that "Le ton 'rosse' finit par devenir, au théâtre, le ton caractéristique de l'époque 1900."<sup>16</sup>

## The Comédie Rosse: Footnotes

1. F.A. Taylor, "Georges Ancey: a forgotten dramatist", 331. It may be significant that "Ancey's generation" was one of enfants de la défaite: he had been 10 years old in 1870. Lemaître characterized them as "une génération de 'struggleforlifeurs' et de dilettantes" (Impressions, 5. 248).
2. Filon's description (in De Dumas à Rostand, 70) has been cited in William Archer, Study and Stage, S.M. Waxman, Antoine and the Théâtre-Libre, Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old, O.G. Brockett and Robert Findlay, Century of Innovation and Edward Braun, The Director and the Stage, among others.
3. Daniel Gerould, "Oscar Méténier and Comédie Rosse", 16.
4. Lemaître, op. cit. 282.
5. Baron Georges-Marie-Edmond Mathevon de Curnieu (mis-called Mathiron de Curnière in Pellissier's Anthologie du théâtre français contemporain), in literature Georges Ancey, was born in Paris in 1860. He worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs until 1888, the year that his first play, M. Lamblin, was produced by Antoine, whose close and valued friend he became. The Théâtre-Libre also staged Les Inséparables (1889) and L'Ecole des veufs (1889), both with a considerable measure of success mixed with a little sharp criticism. Grand'mère, a three-act comedy (containing details curiously anticipating Feydeau's Léonie est en avance), failed badly when presented by a different kind of troupe to a different kind of public at the Odéon in 1890, and Ancey returned to the Théâtre-Libre for La Dupe in 1891. L'Avenir, about the withering-away of love deferred, was staged at the Théâtre-Antoine in 1899, and the anti-clerical Ces Messieurs, banned until 1905 in France, was premiered with success in Brussels in 1903. Another play, Le Médecin des femmes, was incomplete at his death in 1917.
6. Lemaître, op. cit., 281.
7. Ibid., 282.
8. Cf. Brockett and Findlay, op. cit., 94: "Rosserie was a descriptive term applied to naturalistic plays which treat base and ignoble characters who assume a façade of respectability and in which the playwright, with callous and bitter irony, draws aside the cloak of respectability to reveal the ugly and the bestial beneath."
9. Jean Jullien, (1854-1919), critic and theorist of the drama (he coined the phrase tranche de vie) and one of the ablest playwrights connected with the comédie rosse. He had given up a career as an industrial chemist to become a writer. Following La Sérénade, Antoine produced

his étude psychologique L'Echéance in 1889. Jullien founded the periodical Art et critique the same year. Le Maître, a dour paysannerie of 1890, was his last play for Antoine, and his style began to change somewhat with La Mer (Odéon, 30 September 1891). La Poigne (Gymnase, 28 October 1900) was probably the most notable of his subsequent plays. He stopped writing in 1910. Since his death in 1919, "L'oubli a presque complètement enveloppé le nom et l'oeuvre de cet esprit puissant et probe qui sacrifia la gloire à la volonté de ne se plier à aucune compromission." (Talvart & Place, 10, 210).

10. Born in Paris in 1856, Gaston Salandri (sometimes Saint-Landri) was an unsuccessful businessman before turning professional man of letters. His first play, Bernard Palissy, a drame staged at the Cluny in 1879, was written in collaboration with Brioux, who was also co-author of the vaudeville Le Bureau des divorces (1888). His first play for the Théâtre-Libre had been La Prose in 1888. Shortly after La Rançon, a one-act comedy called Les Vieux was staged by the Escholiers, who also produced M. Chaumont in 1892. That same year he returned to the Théâtre-Libre with Le Grappin, but thereafter produced no drama of any importance.
11. Oscar Méténier (1859-1913) was one of Antoine's earliest 'discoveries'. His En famille was the sensation of the Théâtre-Libre's second programme in 1887. Until he turned professional writer, he was a clerical worker at a succession of police stations and prided himself on his familiarity with the underworld and the seamiest side of Parisian life which formed the subject of his most characteristic work. However, the translations of Tolstoy's La Puissance des ténèbres and of Ostrovsky's L'Orage on which he worked with Isaac Pavlovsky were historically important. His original stage works ranged from drame to vaudeville and operetta, but his chief loyalty was to stage naturalism. The Grand-Guignol, which he founded in 1897, was originally intended to continue the traditions of the Théâtre-Libre, but became associated with the sensational genre of drama to which it has given its name.
12. Gerould, op. cit., 18-19.
13. Becque, Oeuvres complètes, 7, 66.
14. Ibid.
15. Henderson, 30.
16. Voltz, 160.

GEORGES FEYDEAU (1862-1921).<sup>1</sup>

Since the Second World War there has been a remarkable revival of interest in Feydeau. His riotous vaudevilles have reconquered audiences throughout the world, and his work has been studied with a critical respect and thoroughness which his contemporaries could never have imagined. Marcel Achard's now famous introductory essay, prefaced to the Théâtre complet (1948-56), did much the same for Feydeau as Soupault's book did for Labiche; but since then Feydeau has been even luckier than his master in the volume and quality of the critical attention he has received from academics, graduate students and theatre people, mostly (though not exclusively) American and French, from the pioneering studies of Norman R. Shapiro to the present day.

In a study such as this, it would be unthinkable to omit Feydeau; but with the wealth of specialized research available, it would equally be presumptuous to attempt to do more here than simply survey his work to 1900, particularly in its relation to French comic theatre in general, incidentally noting a few problems of detail still subsisting in the literature.

Feydeau's first comic play, the one-act comedy Par la fenêtre of 1882,<sup>2</sup> was a very simple saynète for two players, in which the motive force was supplied by the stage stereotype of the fierily jealous Brazilian, though he never appeared in person. Manuel Esteban has argued that even in this slight sketch there were hints of features developed in the playwright's later and more complex work: the foreigner figure, the domineering and irrational woman, the weak and confused male, and the like.

Amour et piano, another one-act comedy, staged at the Athénée on 28 January 1883,<sup>3</sup> was essentially a skilfully extended double quiproquo, Lucile assuming Edouard to be a piano teacher while he took her for a celebrated "actress". The third character, Baptiste, was a dull-witted but opinionated servant, a type who would frequently reappear in later works.

Gibier de potence was a far-fetched piece - a comédie-bouffe - in one act. It was another quiproquo play, but with a cast now increased to eight, the plot was a little more complicated, and not yet handled with the pace and deftness the author would acquire. Feydeau, a talented amateur actor, himself played the naïve cuckold Plumard when the play was created by the Cercle des Arts Intimes on 1 June 1883.<sup>4</sup>

The following work was a rather curious one. Fiancés en herbe, staged at the Salle Kriegelstein<sup>5</sup> on 29 March 1886, was termed a comédie enfantine, the characters being René, aged eleven, and Henriette, aged nine. There was almost no action, so the single scene was, in effect, a dialogue based on a child's-eye view of the world. As such, it may have appealed to a contemporary taste for such things, developed by Gyp's very popular sketches, "Les Dialogues du petit Bob", published in La Vie parisienne from around 1882.

On 17 December of the same year,<sup>6</sup> the Renaissance created Feydeau's most ambitious and successful play to date: the three-act comedy Tailleur pour dames. It relied for its entertaining complexity on two chief devices of comic structure. One was the quiproquo, here lavishly multiplied, so that Aubin, for example, had reason to believe: 1) that Bassinet was "Dr. Moulineaux", 2) that the genuine Moulineaux

was one of his patients, a dressmaker named "Machin", 3) that Rosa Bassinet (née Pinchette) was one "Mme de Sainte-Anigreuse", and 4) that Moulineaux's mother-in-law was the Queen of Greenland.

The other comic device principally employed in the play was one of Feydeau's own, self-imposed rules of procedure; what we might term the Principle of Obligatory Confrontation, expressed by Feydeau himself in the formula:

Quand, dans mes pièces, deux de mes personnages  
ne doivent pas se rencontrer, je les mets le plus  
tôt possible en présence."<sup>7</sup>

The reasons why such characters "should not" meet are of two different orders, one pertaining to the characters' interests within the fiction and another affecting the conduct of the play as a play. In the first sense, the meeting is "impossible" because it would be horribly mortifying for one or more characters on stage. In the second sense, it is often "impossible" also in the respect that it appears to the spectator that the encounter must spell the end of the game in hand, that the plot could not survive certain revelations which seem bound to ensue.

Feydeau's amazing powers of invention made him the master of this kind of suspenseful conjuring-trick, his greatest tour-de-force probably being that moment in La Dame de chez Maxim when the false Mme Petypon was introduced to the true Mme Petypon without the latter discovering that she was being impersonated (II, vii).

In Tailleur pour dames the principle was already being ruthlessly applied. Hardly had Dr Moulineaux managed to convince his wife that he had been out all night tending the desperately ill Bassinet than Bassinet arrived as sound as a

dollar; Moulineaux unwittingly handed the swooning Rosa, runaway wife of Bassinet, to the husband who was looking for her; and so on. The public soon learned that the wrong person could be relied upon to come through the door at the wrong moment every time.

Although some aspects of the writing would be further developed in his later work (more elaboration of character, for instance), the pace and management of the plot in this early play were already virtually up to the standard of Feydeau's maturity. Tailleur pour dames was a great success with the public and did much to establish the author, hitherto known chiefly as a writer of monologues, as a recognized vaudevilliste.

Unfortunately, his success was undermined by the works which followed, which in one way or another seemed to fall short of the high expectations aroused by Tailleur pour dames. Yet Feydeau seems to have gone out of his way to court popularity with his next work, La Lycéenne, a three-act vaudeville-opérette to music by Gaston Serpette, produced at the Nouveautés on 23 December 1887,

Choisissant non seulement un genre populaire  
mais aussi un collaborateur des plus connus à  
l'époque pour consolider une renommée nouvel-  
lement acquise.<sup>8</sup>

Shapiro might have added that the setting for the second act also looks like a bid for favour. As James Harding has pointed out:

Convents and girls' boarding schools had an irresistible attraction for nineteenth-century plot-makers. Mr. Pickwick's embarrassing adventure in the establishment for young ladies is part of a long tradition.<sup>9</sup>

Audiences apparently found a never-failing piquancy in the situation.



Despite all precautions, though, neither the play nor the score found much favour with the press, and La Lycéenne's career was brief, "littéralement saboté par la critique",<sup>10</sup> Lorcey maintained, but Feydeau himself blamed Jane May, who played Finette, for the failure. The truth is, perhaps, that it was not one of the author's better or more amiable works: the characterization was very thin and the comedy was rather reliant on verbal humour of medium quality.

By Lorcey's account,<sup>11</sup> the failure of La Lycéenne led the playwright to suppress a three-act comedy he had written entitled A qui ma femme?, which was neither acted nor published, and his next venture was Un bain de ménage, a one-act comedy produced at the Renaissance on 13 April 1888.<sup>12</sup> However this proved a fairly feeble piece, neither very funny nor particularly ingenious.

Chat en poche, a vaudeville in three acts which was presented next, on 19 September 1888, may seem to us a rather better work, but it too was a complete failure with both public and critics. They were not happy with the initial premiss, a quiproquo whereby the law-student Dufausset was taken for a famous tenor, and thought the thinness and improbability of the idea was made worse by being spread out over three acts.

Les Fiancés de Loches, a vaudeville in three acts presented at the Cluny on 27 September 1888, was also a failure. Lorcey suggested the acting may have been largely to blame, "la troupe du théâtre Cluny étant l'une des plus discutables de la capitale sur le plan de la qualité";<sup>13</sup> but the reviews make it clear that it was not the performance so much as the play itself which the critics so strongly disliked.

Once more the plot was founded on a quiproquo: a group of provincials mistook an employment bureau for a marriage agency, and were themselves taken for domestics seeking a situation. In the course of three acts, all the potentialities of this idea were pretty well exhausted. The reviewers were generally in agreement about what was wrong with the play. The authors had failed to respect that basic modicum of plausibility which contemporary audiences demanded even of a vaudeville.

For us today, the play has some interest from the standpoint of theatrical history in that it was the first play written by Feydeau in partnership with Maurice Desvallières, who was to become his principal collaborator.<sup>14</sup> They worked together again, with hardly more successful results, on L'Affaire Edouard, staged by the Variétés on 12 January 1889. The press once more was cool. Though the ingredients were perhaps none of the freshest (the piece was reminiscent of Hennequin in particular), the chief objection raised was that the structure was negligently handled: this despite the fact that the second act had already been extensively recast.

Feydeau collaborated with Desvallières yet again on both C'est une femme du monde, a one-act comedy, and Le Mariage de Barillon, a vaudeville in three acts, which were presented on the same bill at the Renaissance on 10 March 1890. The first was a simple and perfectly artificial piece, based on a set of convenient and symmetrical coincidences. The title suggests its appeal was supposed to reside in the satire of the two cocottes pretending - ineptly - to be society ladies; but its chief charm may well lie in the character of the maître d'hôtel, Alfred.

Le Mariage de Barillon developed an improbable initial

situation into a particularly wild fantasy full of bizarre details. Once again the critics complained that the work was loosely structured, though most were affected in spite of themselves by the sheer hectic pace of the thing. The audience of the premiere evidently laughed immoderately; and yet attendances fell off, and the play's run was short.

Little information is available about a one-act operetta by Feydeau and Desvallières entitled Mademoiselle Nounou, created in Brussels on 25 April 1890. It is probably safe to conclude that this, too, was no great success.

Feydeau's career had thus reached a state of crisis by the spring of 1890. Since the triumph of Tailleur pour dames, he had tried to tempt the public with no less than eight offerings of various kinds and genres, written either alone or in partnership with Desvallières, and all had been more or less unsuccessful. It would have been understandable if he had decided at that point to renounce the stage, accounting Tailleur pour dames an isolated, happy fluke.

Instead, he made a kind of retreat, to give more thought to the craft of play-making. His friend René Peter remembered Feydeau telling him that during the next two years,

Il s'exila pour vivre un long temps côte à côte avec l'oeuvre des grands modèles dans son art et s'en inspirer autant qu'il le pourrait; après quoi il serait en droit d'espérer un destin meilleur. Et ces maîtres dont il fit choix, ce furent: Labiche pour l'observation des caractères, Meilhac pour le dialogue et Hennequin pour la partie "métier".<sup>15</sup>

What Feydeau scholars call his apprenticeship was over. The first fruits of his period of study and reflection were two three-act comedies. The Palais-Royal rejected one, written in collaboration with Desvallières, but accepted

Monsieur chasse!, which was created on 23 April 1892 before an audience convulsed with laughter. This time the reviewers too were more than satisfied: "Monsieur chasse est un vaudeville très bien fait, et Monsieur chasse est un vaudeville vraiment gai",<sup>16</sup> wrote Jules Lemaître. Since the play had these merits, apparently no one cared overmuch that the subject was of the most hackneyed: adultery discomfited. In fact, taken individually several of the episodes were well-worn: the wronged wife's retaliation in kind, the  
 16 > police officer catching the wrong couple in flagrante delicto, the classic caleçonade.

Just the same the play was a very marked advance on Le Mariage de Barillon. This can even be seen simply by looking at the script, where the copious stage-directions show a new attention to subtle detail. Nor had the simple automata of Barillon given any hint of the flair for character observation which can be glimpsed here, as in the cameo of that memorable concierge, the ci-devant Comtesse de Latour du Nord, a victim of love yet still its ardent votary. The vaudeville drew close to comedy proper in her scenes at the beginning of the second act; and again in Act III scenes x & xi, where the forced and inconsequential "conversation" of the guilty trio, what ethologists call displacement activity, was the absolute antithesis of wit but was very funny because of its human truth.

Deservedly, Monsieur chasse! had a very great success - over three hundred performances - but this could hardly compare with the triumph of the play the Palais-Royal had refused, for it was Champignol malgré lui, which began its triumphal career of 422 consecutive performances at the

Nouveautés on 5 November 1892.<sup>17</sup>

From the outset, it has been obvious to critics that from a technical point of view Feydeau and Desvallières's smash-hit was really a very imperfect work. The first act had little real interest, serving simply to manoeuvre the principal characters into position for Act II; while the third was scarcely more than a necessary formality, the restoration of a state of equilibrium on which the final curtain could be rung down. It was then, largely by virtue of its second act alone that Champignol provoked that delirious hilarity of the audience that all contemporary accounts attest and which made the play a legend in its time.

The reaction of the original public was so intense that several commentators have wondered if some factor besides the comic brilliance of Feydeau and Desvallières was involved. Some critics, among them Edmond Stoullig, have linked the success of the scenes of barracks life to the fact that a high proportion of the audience had themselves experienced military service and so were particularly well placed to appreciate the accuracy of the depiction and the aptness of the satire.

Jules Lemaître accepted this, but also advanced the interesting theory that a military setting was uniquely propitious to the quiproquo, since the rigid hierarchy, draconian protocol and slavish obedience imposed by military life meant that it was not simply dramatically convenient, but actually true to life that the words which would have cleared up the confusion should never be spoken:

Ce n'est point le bon plaisir de l'auteur et la complicité du public, c'est la discipline militaire elle-même et la règle de l'obéissance passive qui s'opposent à ce que le malentendu

soit éclairci. Ce qui serait ailleurs audacieuse convention est ici vraisemblance suprême.<sup>18</sup>

There is something to be said for this view, and instances of military discipline preventing misunderstandings from being put right are to be found in the military sketches of Courteline and Mouëzy-Eon.

Ultimately, though, the phenomenal gaiety occasioned by the second act of Champignol was chiefly due to the comic skill of the authors, though curiously enough the undisputed clou, the scene where both Champignols are on guard together (scene xxi), was added only during rehearsals at the suggestion of the actor Germain.

Shortly after Champignol malgré lui began its year-long initial run at the Nouveautés, a three-act comedy by Feydeau and Maurice Hennequin entitled Le Système Ribadier opened at the Palais-Royal on 30 November 1892. The reviews were benign and the plot touched on a topic then in vogue, hypnotism; but audiences seem to have missed the full-blooded verve of Feydeau's two previous successes in this less frantic comedy. So despite neat enough workmanship and some nice touches of observation, this work did less well, running only until the following February.

No new play by Feydeau was premiered in 1893, but on 9 January 1894 the Palais-Royal created one of his best plays and greatest successes: Un fil à la patte. This comedy in three acts was one of the most "well-made" of all the playwright's works: the plotting was efficient and tidy, the timing and choreography remarkably precise.

The subject matter was rather interesting. Instead of the more usual scenario of a married man seeking extramarital adventure, the plot concerned a viveur who was endeavouring

to settle down respectably, and encountering as many setbacks and perils along the way as any would-be adulterer.

This play also gave prominence to a type who would be a major figure in Feydeau's theatre, especially during the period from about 1899 to about 1908. Demi-mondaines had occasionally appeared in his earlier plays - Miranda the equestrienne, in L'Affaire Edouard, for example; but Un fil à la patte gave the first of several detailed depictions of the cocotte and her milieu.

In its technique, the play was a kind of compendium of most of Feydeau's favourite comic effects. The comic foreigner was present - in fact three of them, including perhaps the most comic of all Feydeau's foreigners, General Irrigua. There was the comedy of apparently malevolent objects: proliferating copies of Le Figaro, "Non, mais tire-t-il, ce journal!... tire-t-il!" (I, vii); keys that passed from the right hands into the wrong ones; and this in turn led to a maddeningly uncooperative door, which gave Feydeau an opportunity to indulge his fondness for trucs. There were various episodes of undressing, climaxed by a kind of reprise of the caleçonnade in Monsieur chasse! Headlong flights and pursuits regularly punctuated the action, which gathered impetus as it proceeded till it attained much of the antic brio of Champagnol.

Paralleling the quickening pace, another progression was taking place, a modal shift from near-realistic comedy towards stylization and fantasy, not uncommon in Feydeau's longer plays. The early scenes of Lucette's household and friends contained a great deal that was well observed and convincingly lifelike. Yet by Act III scene viii the style had changed to

the most artificial convention with the "singing lesson" on the stairs (manifestly imitated from Le Malade imaginaire and Le Barbier de Séville), concluding with a touch of pure operetta as the domestics joined in. The skilful management of the gradual change was not the least of the play's merits.

A minor one-act comedy, Notre futur, was staged on 11 February 1894, about a month after the opening of Un fil à la patte.<sup>19</sup> The two plays were entirely different, and in fact Notre futur was quite unlike the playwright's usual manner altogether.

Jacques Lorcey wrote that:

C'est un élégant et léger pastiche des comédies et proverbes de Musset, un peu enfantin seulement (il est très vraisemblable, d'ailleurs, que Feydeau l'a tiré de ses essais de jeunesse), mais qui serait encore tout à fait présentable de nos jours, en lever de rideau.<sup>20</sup>

It might well be thought, though, that the play does not recall Musset so much as that simili-Musset, Edouard Pailleron. An all-female cast, in the manner of Le Chevalier Trumeau or Pendant le bal, was in keeping with Pailleron's marked bias towards women characters. The basic situation, of an older woman giving advice to a less experienced one about affairs of the heart, bore a resemblance to that of Petite pluie or Le Chevalier Trumeau. The idea of the widow and the young girl as "rivals" for the same suitor had some affinity with the plots of L'Étincelle or La Souris. Furthermore, Valentine was perhaps Feydeau's closest approach to a "Pailleron girl", truer to type, anyway, than the Finette of La Lycéenne, a more knowing and brattish version of Gyp's Loulou. The atmosphere, too, if gayer than in most of Pailleron's sentimental comedies, was still fairly subdued for Feydeau.



Le Ruban, a comedy in three acts written with Desvallières, was created at the Odéon on 24 February of the same year. The work had been coolly received at its générale, but on opening night it was saved by a dazzling comic performance by Dailly as Paginet, the monomaniac who hoped his refutation of Pasteur (and his pretty niece) would gain him the Légion d'honneur he so coveted. Thanks to Dailly, Le Ruban had forty-five performances, but it was not really a very good play. In particular, the construction was surprisingly defective.

Before the year was out, however, Feydeau and Desvallières vindicated themselves with a new three-act play which had all the comic abundance, the brio and the structural precision that Le Ruban lacked. Created by a very fine cast at the Nouveautés on 5 December 1894, L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange was an immediate success with the public. According to Sarcey, the laughter was so uproarious that the actors' lines could not be heard, and the second act ended in pantomime.

In its essentials, it was directly derived from Monsieur chasse!, another play of adulterous intent and untimely encounters; a pure vaudeville with no pretensions to social comment or to subtlety of characterization, though the acrimonious Pinglet menage foreshadowed the war between the sexes depicted in the one-act comedies of married life Feydeau wrote at the end of his career. Technically, the play was a sort of masterpiece, an exceptionally well-made play, as Sarcey was the first to realize.

Curiously, although their play was a great success both critically and financially, Feydeau and Desvallières ceased to work together until the musical comedy L'Age d'or in 1905, for

reasons we do not know.

Working solo, Feydeau showed equal brilliance in Le Dindon, a three-act play staged on 8 February 1896 at the Palais-Royal, where it ran until December. Some commentators have seen this as Feydeau's masterpiece, although technically it was a little unorthodox in its sandwich construction. The second act was a vaudeville as fast and furious as any he ever wrote, but the first and third were something pretty close to comedy of manners. The humour in them was still broad and stylized at times, but there were also thought-provoking exchanges about love and sex and marriage that had relevance (sometimes disturbing relevance) in the real world. The playwright showed unusual skill in managing the transitions from one register to another in such a way as to persuade the audience to enjoy each act on its own terms, to accept, after the riotous hennequinade of the second act, one of his very rare moments of pathos in the third.

It was a play of unusual richness, both in the variety of its characters and in the range of reactions it solicited from the audience. Pontagnac and Soldignac were unlikeable in quite distinct ways, for instance, and though both Pontagnac and Rédillon were equally intent on seducing Lucienne into adultery, their effect on the spectator was subtly different. Some characters invited quite a complex response: the Pinchards, for example, were both grotesque and somewhat touching, as, in his own way, was the dogged Gérôme. These slight touches of compassion, uncommon in Feydeau's work, in no way detracted from the comedy of one of his best plays.

Les Pavés de l'ours, created at the Théâtre Montpensier

in Versailles on 26 September 1896, was a work of a wholly different order. It was a very broad one-act farce, depending for virtually all of its humour on the barbarous belgicisms and preternatural ignorance of the valet Bretel, who was in effect a clown. A skimpy plot merely served to string together an amorphous accumulation of separate gags and misunderstandings.

Séance de nuit, staged on 29 March 1897,<sup>21</sup> was considerably less broad in its effects, but in its own fashion just as conventional. It was a one-act deception play on a traditional subject, and the action turned on the venerable device of two letters put into the wrong envelopes. Baker has compared it to C'est une femme du monde for its "ingenuity and economy in its use of characters to serve more than one function",<sup>22</sup> but in some respects it seems clumsy and uneconomic. Gentillac and Emilie Bamboche were hardly exploited to the full, the latter particularly: her name was all Feydeau really required. Again, in scene xii, there was some fairly lengthy by-play about chilling a tisane de champagne, apparently for the sole purpose of setting up a mediocre malentendu between Artemise, complaining about her late husband, and Fauconnet, whose thoughts were elsewhere:

- Et dire que pendant ce temps, le misérable me trompait!

Enfin, que répondez-vous à ça?

- Ah! il gagne à être refroidi!

- Mon mari?

- Hein? Ah! non, non, non, je parle du champagne!  
Je... je ne répondais pas à ce que vous disiez.

At his best, Feydeau did not signal his punches or wordily labour a joke like this.

Jacques Lorcey put in a good word for the play, which he considered funny from start to finish:

Cela tient essentiellement au personnage d'Artemise, pivot de l'action, extrêmement vivant et vraisemblable, caricaturé avec un humour impitoyable.<sup>23</sup>

One might observe that this kind of Gilbertian derision of the aging and ugly woman is not to every taste. Perhaps the best thing in the play was a secondary character, the self-possessed maître d'hôtel Joseph, very like his predecessor and colleague, the philosophical Alfred, in C'est une femme du monde. In fact, to judge it by its content and technique, one might have thought this play also dated from around 1889-1890.

Feydeau's mature skills were not much in evidence, either, in Dormez, je le veux!, a one-act vaudeville presented on 29 April 1897 at the Eldorado. Feydeau once more invited the Parisian public to laugh at the simplicity of an oafish Belgian manservant, as in Les Pavés de l'ours, while also exploiting some of the broader comic potentialities of hypnotism, a subject used previously in Le Système Ribadier. The idea of a servant hypnotising his employers and exchanging roles with them was not entirely new, any more than that of the ineptitude of a would-be hypnotist, and the play's humour consisted for the most part of fairly elementary gags. In short, Lorcey's assessment of Dormez, je le veux! was probably fair: "Avec la meilleure volonté du monde, on ne peut voir dans cette oeuverette qu'un bon divertissement de patronage."<sup>24</sup>

No new play by Feydeau was staged in 1898, though he did provide the scenario for the two-act ballet La Bulle d'amour, music by Francis Thomé, created at the Folies-Marigny on 11 May; but on 17 January 1899 the public's patience was

generously rewarded with the creation at the Nouveautés of La Dame de chez Maxim.

Feydeau's new three-act comedy was an unqualified success with both the public and the critics, who marvelled at its métier. A token of its popularity might be seen in the number of parodies and oeuvres à côté it spawned: La Dame de Saint-maxime, La Demoiselle de chez Maxim, La Dinde de chez Maxim, La Môme de chez Maxim. Revues in the spring of 1899 capitalized on the current hit, sometimes in their titles: Le Monsieur de chez Maxim's, La Revue de chez Maxim's, Le Garçon de chez Maxim. Subtler were those that adverted to the Môme Crevette's catch-phrase, "Eh! allez donc, c'est pas mon père!", which had become a popular scie: Et allez donc and Et allez donc, c'est pas l'compère!

La Dame de chez Maxim is an epitome of the Feydeau vaudeville at its full maturity. The technical mastery that the playwright had acquired was manifest in the sureness with which he conducted a large cast (twenty-nine named characters) through an action of the utmost complexity, which yet was of the most rigorous precision. Reviewers were impressed that an unusually long first act should not have dragged for a moment, and that the number of characters deployed should have given rise to no confusion in the carefully organized chaos.

The dramatist brought into play a very wide range of the traditional resources of farce, including many of his own favourite devices, motifs and conventions. On the foundation of the classic "Morning After" situation of the first act, he built up a complex edifice of malentendus, quiproquos and deliberate impersonations, disguises, slaps, pursuits,

threatened duels and the like. We may suppose that Feydeau particularly relished the truc of the apparition of the seraph (which rather recalls Ubu roi, V, i) and the celebrated fauteuil extatique, in which the marvels of modern technology and the mysteries of the hypnotic state were blended.

Several of the characters, too, belonged to recognizable conventions, such as Petypon, the very type of the harrassed husband who figured so prominently in Feydeau; the Môme Crevette, quite the most memorable of all his cocottes; and the general, the stock figure of the bluff, gruff comic soldier, a favourite with comic dramatists from Labiche to Courteline. The second act also showed that the satire of provincials avid to ape the ways of the capital had lost none of its savour for a Parisian public since Molière.

A source of humour that Feydeau had not previously used was represented by Gabrielle's superstitious gullibility, which made her ready to see seraphs and ghosts, and to hearken to voices purporting to be angelic. Such episodes may not strike audiences today as the very cream of Feydeau's comedy; but perhaps they (and the fauteuil extatique) should be seen in relation to the anti-rationalist reaction which occurred towards the end of the century, shown by a revived interest in animal magnetism and hypnotism, exotic religious practices and the occult.

For if La Dame de chez Maxim was a paradigmatic specimen of the playwright's work, it was also a characteristically fin-de-siècle play. The social reality of the time lent symbolic significance to the way in which the cocotte dominated the play: desired by dukes and generals, a celebrity in her own world and able, on a whim, to infiltrate that of

the bourgeoisie and even the aristocracy, imposing her colourful speech and mannerisms as models on respectable society.<sup>25</sup>

She was able to do so because she was both freer and more vital than those with whom she came into contact. Petypon had some vigour in him, but he could not control her because he was shackled by his bourgeois desires for money (the general's inheritance and Gabrielle's fortune) and for respectability. Mongicourt had a bachelor's freedom but lacked energy, so his was basically a passive role, that of an amused onlooker. Gabrielle, "cette pauvre grenouille desséchée de Gabrielle",<sup>26</sup> superstitious, limited and passably grotesque, was instinctively treated by all as insignificant. Corignon was a hypocrite and a weakling; the general was stupid and hide-bound; and the duke was a curious specimen of fin de race decadence.

One could take the view that the play contained at least token representatives of the church, the aristocracy, the army, the learned professions, and the provincial and Parisian middle classes; and that the impression they presented was of a society gradually decomposing, compromising its constitutive values and losing its will in the pursuit of easy gratifications. Feydeau was not a social critic, however. He simply recorded the types and the behaviour that he saw around him, transposed into a comic key. Any moralising about the record is our affair.

No new play by Feydeau was staged in 1900, in fact La Dame was still running and doing good business among those visiting Paris for the Exhibition; so La Dame de chez Maxim is the last of the playwright's works to fall within our purview. In consequence, the impression given here of his

work as a whole is necessarily incomplete in some degree, omitting major works like La Duchesse des Folies-Bergère (1902), La Main passe (1904), La Puce à l'oreille (1907), Occupe-toi d'Amélie (1908) and the masterly one-act studies of domestic life he wrote towards the end of his career, in which the female leads were what Achard called "Mégères non apprivoisées."<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, some three-quarters of his stage works have now been surveyed, which is probably enough to permit some general observations by way of conclusion.

Perhaps the first thing to be said is that strictly speaking his comic drama was not original, in its subjects, or its characterization, or its dramaturgy. Feydeau used a form laid down and developed successively by Scribe, Labiche and Hennequin; but he brought it to a kind of perfection. In his best work, he displayed those essential qualities of the pièce bien faite: logic, scrupulous aetiology and efficiency, with an exactitude and ingenuity that amounted to elegance.

He was also one of the funniest of all French dramatists, making skilled use of the full range of comic resources at the vaudevilliste's disposal. His plot construction was masterly in its economy, inventiveness and variety. Yves-Alain Favre has catalogued some of the main comic devices and figures found in his plays: the lendemain de fête situation, the quadrille, inversion, the arrivée malencontreuse, repetition or parallelism of situations, the boule de neige, the malentendu and of course the quiproquo.<sup>28</sup>

One is surprized, though, by Favre's contention that verbal comedy was lacking in Feydeau's technique:

Aucune accumulation de mots, aucune jouissance dans la manipulation du langage. Les mots ici



ne servent que de support à l'action.<sup>29</sup>

Favre himself conceded that there were a few exceptions to this principle in some of the Môme Crevette's expressions and occasional jeux de mots of the "Gueuldeb...boas" variety.<sup>30</sup> This still seems to give an inadequate impression of the extent and variety of Feydeau's verbal humour. In the matter of the accumulation of words, for instance, there was this exchange in L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange (I, iv):

- Oui! mais à quel prix est-il, le granit, hein! à quel prix est-il?
- Ah! à quel prix est-il?... Mais alors, mets du liais, du cliquart, de la roche, du banc-franc!...
- C'est trop lourd, tout ça!
- Eh bien! mets de la lambourde, du verglet, du Saint-Leu, du Conflans, du parmin!
- Et puis, tu m'embêtes!... Tu as l'air d'un dictionnaire!

The same passage, incidentally, illustrates another sort of verbal humour of which the playwright was especially fond: professional jargon. It was probably used to best comic advantage in Léonie est en avance, in the obstetric technicalities of Mme Virtuel, but quite a good earlier example occurred at the beginning of Chat en poche, when Dr Landernau was explaining the secret of his canard à la Rouennaise:

Landernau - Tout le mystère est dans la façon de le tuer... C'est très simple... au moyen d'une constriction exercée de la main contre le cou du canard, n'est-ce pas, l'air ne pénétrant plus dans le thorax, l'hématose se fait incomplètement ce qui amène des extravasations sanguines dans le tissu cellulaire qui sépare les muscles sus-hyoïdiens, et sous-hyoïdiens, par conséquent...

Pacarel - Oui, enfin vous lui tordez le cou... (I, i)

Jeux de mots of various kinds (calembours, à-peu-près) were not at all uncommon. Some were intended as such by the

speaker, like Finette's scathing comment on Saboulot (La Lycéenne, I, ii): "De physique, il ferait mieux d'en avoir un peu plus et de l'enseigner un peu moins." Others were the result of misunderstanding, such as this exchange from La Dame de chez Maxim:

Le Général - Au revoir, monsieur! enchanté! vous m'excuserez auprès de madame Mon...? Mon...?

Mongicourt - ...gicourt!

Le Général - Oh! vous avez le temps! ce n'est pas autrement pressé! (I, xvi)

Surely one should recognize as verbal humour the general's habitual mangling of Mongicourt's name: "Mongilet", "Mongiletcourt", and particularly "M. Chose, là, Machincourt." (III, xviii)

The names of Feydeau's characters were often humorous in themselves. The topic does not seem to have received the detailed study accorded to names in Labiche and Courteline, for example, but Baker devoted a valuable page to the question. Many names were simply grotesque in form or meaning, some were ironical like those of Paillardin and Angélique in L'Hôtel du Libre-Echange, while others were apt, a particularly interesting example being Dufausset in Chat en poche, the law-student mistaken for the celebrated tenor Dujeton. The name suggested "fausset" and "faux", both appropriate notions in the circumstances, and furthermore, by its association with "Dujeton", it tended to call to mind the expression "faux comme un jeton." This form of humour was neither particularly high comedy nor in the least original; but it added its modest touch to the general gaiety and stylization of the vaudeville.

There is no need to dwell upon the playwright's constant

recourse to physical humour in all its forms - flights, chases, falls, trances, slaps, kicks, punches, shots and so on - or sight gags, including, of course, the trucs he clearly took such pride in inventing. There can be no doubt that Feydeau had a truly theatrical imagination and was able to see the effect of every move, grouping or piece of business in his mind's eye, just as he could hear the inflection of every line in his head. He was a real man of the theatre, a very competent actor and exceptional metteur en scène as well as a dramatist, and this is obvious from his scripts, as well as from the testimony of those who knew him. If he was no innovator, his thorough understanding of the tradition he worked in enabled him to bring it to its peak, and justified the title generally accorded him as the king of vaudeville.

Feydeau: Footnotes

1. "Georges Feydeau était né à Paris en 1862, d'après Marcel Achard, en 1863, d'après d'autres auteurs," wrote Hervé Lauwick in D'Alphonse Allais à Sacha Guitry, 81. If all authorities now seem agreed on the year as 1862 (rendered all the more probable by a mention in the Goncourt Journal on 24 June 1863), there is still disagreement about the day: 8 October, according to Jacques Lorcey and Esteban (p.1), 8 December according to Esteban (Chronology) Talvart & Place. Achard, Pronko, Baker, and Roman d'Amat in the Dictionnaire de Biographie Française, who further complicates things by giving the date of Feydeau's death as 6 June 1921, as against 5 June, accepted by virtually everyone else.
2. In Feydeau's Théâtre complet, 4, Béliet, 1950, Par la fenêtre was said to have been "Représentée pour la première fois à Rosendaël (Saison 1881)", and this has been adopted by Esteban in his Georges Feydeau. According to Lorcey, however, the first performance was given on 1 June 1882 (accepted by Baker) by the Cercle des Arts Intimes. A new production was staged at the Casino of Rosendaël-Dunkerque on 9 September 1882; and a third at the Hôtel Continental on 5 July 1883. (Lorcey, 75-76 & 78) The play does not appear in Wicks.
3. Staged at, but not by, the Athénée, according to Lorcey, p.76. If it was presented by the Cercle l'Obole, Esteban's description of the performance as "First professional production" seems misleading. The actors were professionals, but it was not a normal, commercial performance.
4. It was also staged by the Cercle Volney on 23 December 1884, which is given by the Théâtre complet, Talvart & Place and Shenkan as the first performance; and again at the Concert-Parisien on 20 February 1885, given as first performance by Wicks.
5. Mistakenly printed "Salle Kriegel" in Shenkan.
6. The year was given in the Théâtre complet as 1887 (adopted by Talvart & Place and Shenkan), but Shapiro's rectification in R.H.Th., 14, (1962) 362-64 is now universally accepted.
7. Cited by Achard, Théâtre complet, 1, 14. When he repeated the passage in Rions avec eux, 104, the words "le plus tôt possible" were omitted.
8. Norman R. Shapiro, "Georges Feydeau: une date essentielle corrigée", 364.
9. James Harding, Folies de Paris, 115. The setting had a topical interest also since Ferry's educational reforms. See Shapiro's doctoral dissertation "Topical Allusions in the Theatre of Georges Feydeau", Harvard, 1959, 215-24.
10. Lorcey, 94.

11. Ibid., 95.
12. The date given by the Théâtre complet and Shenkan, Lorcey and Baker. 15 April was given by Wicks, Talvart & Place and the Dictionnaire de Biographie Française.
13. Lorcey, 97. He further suggested that perhaps "la critique n'admettait pas l'entrée de Feydeau et Desvallières, ces deux 'fils-à-papa', au bataillon des auteurs heureux et faisait son possible pour les éliminer." (97-98)
14. Maurice Desvallières was a grandson of Ernest Legouvé, and brother of the successful painter Georges Desvallières. He was slightly older than Feydeau (being born in Paris in 1857), and he had been writing for the stage since 1879. He also worked alone or with other collaborators, especially Antony Mars.
15. R. Peter, Le Théâtre et la vie, 1, 48.
16. Impressions, 7, 179.
17. In his Guide des théâtres parisiens, 419, Jacques Crépineau wrote of Champignol: "La pièce connut 1 032 représentations et eut l'honneur de clore le théâtre" (i.e. in June 1911); but later, on page 433, he noted "Champignol... dépassait 1 200 représentations consécutives", which is all the more unlikely since on 18 November 1893, the Nouveautés created Mon prince, an operetta by André Sylvane and Charles Clairville, with music by Audran (Wicks 28161).
18. Impressions, 7, 361.
19. This performance, by non-professional actresses at the Salle de Géographie, seems to be accepted by virtually all authorities as the play's premiere; but this is to ignore the problem raised, in passing, by Norman Shapiro's article on the dating of Tailleur pour dames, "Georges Feydeau: une date essentielle corrigée", 363. Shapiro showed that Notre futur was published in volume 8 of Ollendorff's Théâtre de campagne, as early as 1882 (despite being described as inédit in the Théâtre complet), and that Feydeau's monologue Le Colis, published in 1885, carried an allusion to "Notre futur, saynète en un acte, jouée par Mlles Reichemberg et Bartet de la Comédie-Française." If the two actresses did indeed give a salon or cercle performance, one would not expect it to be mentioned in Dubeux's monograph on Bartet.  
  
Should Notre Fur date from around the early Eighties, Pailleron's popularity at that time makes the hypothesis of his having influenced Feydeau's play the more plausible.
20. Lorcey, 127.
21. "De nouveau sur la scène du théâtre Montpensier",

according to the usually reliable Lorcey (138); the Théâtre complet, Shenkan, Wicks, and Talvart & Place all gave the Palais-Royal (the first two with Palais Royal players), though Wicks gave the date as 30 March and Talvart & Place 31 March. Incidentally, the Cluny revival of 1900 was dated 14 September by Shenkan, 14 November by Lorcey and Baker.

22. Baker, 38.
23. Lorcey, 138.
24. Lorcey, 139.
25. Albeit provincial society: "L'influence désastreuse et très réelle, historiquement parlant, des filles entretenues sur une certaine bourgeoisie - ce qui pourrait être, en somme, la grande leçon de la pièce -, Feydeau l'atténue gentiment en situant son deuxième acte dans un milieu provincial où aucun spectateur (même et surtout de province) n'acceptera de se reconnaître." (Lorcey, 147)
26. Lorcey, 147.
27. Introduction to Théâtre complet, 1, 17 and Rions avec eux, 114.
28. "Le Comique de Feydeau", 239-47. Others who have analysed Feydeau's comic technique in extenso include Shenkan and Baker.
29. Favre, 240.
30. Ibid., Note 3.

JULES RENARD (1864-1910)

Jules Renard seems to have had a relatively modest natural talent, but wonderfully well husbanded; so that he made it go as far as many a much greater gift exploited with only the usual degree of care. His example shows what can be done with determination, industry and efficiency. He wrote of himself (admittedly with some typical self-depreciation): "Je n'ai ni mémoire, ni intelligence, et je ne peux être qu'artiste à force d'entraînement." By painstaking work, he forged for himself an admired prose style, simultaneously dense and clear, and by patient thrift he accumulated a stock of ideas and images.

Renard never seems to have let an idea go to waste. His famous Journal was both diary and notebook. Besides recording the events of his day, he jotted down imagined situations, titles for possible future works, images, jeux de mots and fragments of telling repartee, as they occurred to him. This literary larder nourished all his writings. The prose sketches, short stories and novels grew out of the Journal, and usually the plays grew, in their turn, out of his fiction.

Successful as he was in maximizing his gifts, Renard's talent had its limitations. One was the restricted range of his subject matter. Pierre Cogny once wrote of him: "Il ne lui a manqué, pour être grand, que d'aborder de plus amples sujets."<sup>1</sup> The fact is that Renard wrote most often, and wrote best, about situations and people he knew at first hand (in this resembling his friend Courteline). He maintained: "On n'écrit pas ce qu'on veut: on n'écrit que soi-même." Whatever the general validity of this dictum, it is

informative about his own imagination.

Cogny also noted of Renard that his was "une vie sans histoire",<sup>2</sup> and probably one's first impulse is to agree. The only event in it which appears "dramatic", in the common sense of the word, was the death by his own hand of Renard's father in 1897; and even that was apparently a matter of simple voluntary euthanasia, stoically premeditated by the suicide and half-expected by his children.

Yet clearly his life cannot have been sans histoire in the most literal sense, if, as has been suggested, most of Renard's stories and plays were ultimately drawn from his own experience. The explanation of this seeming paradox is that Renard's plots usually turn on quite ordinary events. In one, an apparently unremarkable love affair is amicably wound up. In another, two married people idly toy with the idea of adultery, but decide against it. In a third, a father and son, discovering that they are equally unhappy and lonely, draw closer together.

Sir Harold Hobson has argued that Renard's low-key treatment of mundane events is the authentic naturalism. The kind of writing practised by Zola or the Goncourt brothers, in his opinion,

Is really the romantic agony transposed down the social scale. It serves a useful purpose, but it is not naturalism. The naturalism of Renard, however, is the real thing. It is the reproduction of the audible and visible surfaces, not of exceptional misfortunes, but of quite ordinary life.<sup>3</sup>

As well as tending to be somewhat limited in its scope, Renard's work also inclined to be restricted in its scale, in that he was generally most successful with the smaller forms of writing. In theatrical terms, this meant that



Renard (once again like Courteline) wrote mostly one-act plays: six of the eight completed pieces are in that form.

One might naturally suppose that this was a matter of aesthetic choice on the author's part (an assumption made all the more plausible by his habitual preference for the dense and the concise), and such a view seems supported by various statements in his writings. "Théâtre. Mon unique théorie, c'est de ne jamais faire qu'un acte",<sup>4</sup> he wrote in the Journal, and in the lecture on Poil de Carotte he observed: "Un acte au théâtre, c'est peut-être le cadre idéal. Il faut bien, là, se plier à la fameuse loi classique des trois unités."<sup>5</sup>

Despite this, Renard seems to have known the temptation to faire grand in his plays, perhaps to emulate envied friends like Capus and Rostand, and perhaps influenced by the French practice of reckoning theatrical output by acts (rather than by the number of works), so that, quality being equal, a five-act play is exactly as "important" as five one-act works.

Unfortunately, his ambition to work on the larger scale was subverted by inward doubts about his ability to do so. His very successes, instead of giving him confidence, only increased his inhibitions. After Le Pain de ménage, he complained "Me voilà bien! Sans ce nouveau succès, j'aurais peut-être fait cinq actes passables. Maintenant, tout m'est interdit, excepté le merveilleux."<sup>6</sup>

His next play, Poil de Carotte, was accounted "marvellous" by many, but its success did not dispel his self-doubts, as Vittorio Lugli has pointed out, so shrewdly and sympathetically:

Ove andremo a cercare il suo tempo felice? Non certo nel 1900, quello che pare il colmo dello scrittore e della sua fortuna mondana, col successo di Poil de Carotte a teatro. Perché quel successo gli dà un lieve fervore e un grande tormento, la vana tentazione del guadagno, della 'pièce' ampia, dei tre atti che non vennero mai; lo mette in linea coi vari Capus, gli fa sentire la sua inettitudine, la sua povera superiorità.<sup>7</sup>

After 1900, Renard did at least manage to write Monsieur Vernet and La Bigote in two acts, though many have felt he thereby lost something of the dramatic intensity which is one of the qualities of his best work. For, whatever his limitations, Renard wrote well for the stage. It is only surprising that he was past thirty when he turned to the theatre.

By the end of 1894, Renard was known as the talented author of Sourires pincés, L'Ecornifleur, La Lanterne sourde, Coquecigrues, Le Vigneron dans sa vigne and the recently successful Poil de Carotte, besides his pieces for the Mercure de France and other periodicals. That is to say, he already had an established and growing reputation as a writer of prose fiction when he showed interest in writing plays, an interest which became so absorbing that, as Gilbert Sigaux has pointed out,

De 1897 à 1908, Jules Renard ne publiera rien en librairie (Bucoliques, qui est de 1898, réunit des textes écrits en 1896 et 1897) mais fera jouer cinq pièces.<sup>8</sup>

Several factors drew Renard to the theatre. In the first place, it seemed good for his career. Though he had something of a name in literature, he felt success in the theatre promised fame and fortune of quite another order. The writers of his day believed there was much more profit in a hit play than in a best-selling book. More glory, too: and the difference he imagined between literary and theatrical reputation is clear in his explanation as to why it had been

tempting to adapt Poil de Carotte for the theatre: "Tendant, parce qu'en cas de succès Poil de Carotte sortait de la pâle clarté du livre, bondissait en pleine lumière."<sup>9</sup> This alluring idea of the dramatist's rewards was reinforced by the example of some of his closest friends: Tristan Bernard; Alfred Capus, who made (and spent) millions annually; and of course the phenomenal Rostand.

Further, he was actively urged to try writing plays, not only by those same friends (whose encouragement was presumably more or less disinterested) but also by theatre people, most notably Lucien Guitry and André Antoine, who had an eye to what was good for the theatre as well as for Renard.

Finally, it was almost inevitable that he should at least experiment with drama, because his literary technique accorded so well, in various respects, with the nature of dramatic expression itself. Thus, the clarity he always strove to achieve was a virtue particularly precious in performance. For unlike the reader, the spectator cannot control the débit of the text to keep pace with his understanding. Renard's accustomed practice of stripping a text to its essentials, leaving much of interest to be read between the lines, also worked well on stage. Very often, even in his books, this desire for concision would reduce a situation to the bare dialogue of the participants. As far as technique was concerned, it was quite a small step from Les Caquets de rupture to Le Plaisir de rompre.

By 1900, four of Renard's eight completed plays had been produced, and these included the best of his stage works. Of the other four, Le Cousin de Rose was never produced. Huit jours à la campagne was not a success, and even the author's

own references to it seem curiously apathetic. Staged under its original title, L'Invité, and signed with the pseudonym "Paul Page", it served as a curtain-raiser at the Renaissance for about a month in 1906, with a brief revival in 1907. La Bigote (1909) was an anti-clerical play, and as such an act of filial piety towards Renard's father and of filial rancour towards his mother, like Poil de Carotte but much inferior to it. Monsieur Vernet (1903) was derived from Renard's novel L'Ecornifleur, losing most of its rosserie in the process. It is probably the best of the post-1900 plays, but not the equal of Le Pain de ménage or Poil de Carotte. The playwright himself, comparing it with Poil de Carotte, shrewdly reflected: "Je suis plus malin dans Monsieur Vernet, qui, à cause de cette adresse, est peut-être d'une qualité inférieure."<sup>10</sup>

In the earlier plays, written before he had acquired this "adresse", Renard was perhaps more uniquely himself. However, the first play which was presented under his name, the stage adaptation of his story La Demande (1889), appears to have been substantially the work of Georges Docquois,<sup>11</sup> whom he had met in 1893 and who had previously adapted Reibach's Mélie for the Théâtre-Libre (1892).

La Demande received its first performance, with an amateur cast, at the Théâtre Municipal in Docquois's home town of Boulogne, on 26 January 1895. Describing the premiere, Renard ironically noted in his diary entry for 28 January:

Un monsieur, auteur dramatique du pays, nous dit que c'était une belle tranche de vie, qu'il connaissait ça, que c'était du bon Théâtre-Libre, mais que ça ne prendrait pas.

In truth, the self-important local was not entirely wrong,

either about the play or its reception. By Renard's own account, the premiere was no triumph, and though the play was later taken up by the Odéon, where it opened on 9 November 1895, it made a fairly modest career of fifteen performances.<sup>12</sup>

As to its being a Théâtre-Libre sort of piece, it had in fact been accepted by Antoine but its production was forestalled by the end of his management. In style and in spirit, it was in keeping with the Théâtre-Libre's repertory. The plot concerns the courtship of a middle-aged cattle buyer, who rejects a farmer's elder daughter in favour of her prettier sister. Counterpointing this simple story, the two men eat, smoke their pipes and discuss the farmer's beasts, which are of much more interest to him than the mute sorrow and disappointment of his daughter. It might indeed be described as a tranche de vie, and in the respect that the apparent point of the play was that peasants are pragmatists, unsentimental to the point of utter insensitivity, it was in the tradition of such cynical Théâtre-Libre paysanneries as Jean Jullien's Le Maître (21 March 1890) and Eugène Bourgeois's Le Pendu (6 July 1891) and Mariage d'argent (12 June 1893).

Renard's next two plays showed a quite different aspect of his talent. While La Demande (like Poil de Carotte) belongs to the group of plays with a country background which Guichard and Sigaux have termed the Cycle de Chitry, Le Plaisir de rompre and Le Pain de ménage are of the "Parisian" group, which would later include Monsieur Vernet also.

Le Plaisir de rompre, a brief one-act piece for two players, was drawn from the dialogue entitled Les Caquets de rupture (in Coquecigrues, 1893) and La Maîtresse (1896). It was created under the auspices of the Escholiers at the

Bouffes-Parisiens on 16 March 1897. A few weeks later, on 8 May, it was given a matinee performance at the Bodinière, with an introductory lecture by Jules Lemaître.

Right from the dress-rehearsal on 15 March, the work was a great success, and the author felt that he had really "arrived" at last. The actors, Jeanne Granier and Henry Mayer, gave brilliant performances, and the press was excellent.

The reviews make interesting reading, however, because while some praised the play's touching pathos, others (equally favourable) described it as atroce, cruel, terrible et morose. The reason for such divergent accounts of its effect was that different critics had quite significantly dissimilar interpretations of the play.

Not that there was disagreement about the action, which was as plain and simple as it was slight. Blanche and Maurice have been lovers, but now each is to marry someone else. As they meet for the last time, the emotion and solemnity of the occasion make them awkward with each other at first, especially Maurice, who tries to hide his unease beneath a flow of bright chatter. They begin to reminisce nostalgically, but as they re-read together one of his old love-letters to her, his desire is rekindled. Blanche rebuffs his importunate advances and, disappointed and jealous, he turns abusively angry and makes to leave. Then her distress, that their leave-taking should have been spoilt, touches him. He apologizes, and slips away, leaving Blanche to her thoughts.

The story, then, was of the simplest, in terms of what happened; but what it signified was variously interpreted. Some critics understood the situation to be that both lovers still cared for each other, though they pretended not to.

Some felt that it was only Blanche whose affection was not yet extinct and who was secretly suffering in consequence. Others, however, accepting that the affair was truly dead for both, thought the play aimed to show "l'infinie et inévitable tristesse de toutes les ruptures, même de celles qui délient ceux qui ne s'aiment plus",<sup>13</sup> while a fourth view held that the very point of the play was that, although they did not realize it themselves, neither Maurice nor Blanche had ever truly loved the other.

External evidence may help to indicate which of these perspectives Renard had in mind, or at least to eliminate those he probably did not. It is fairly certain that the basis of the story was autobiographical, that Maurice was Renard and Blanche was Danièle Davyle, a minor actress at the Comédie-Française.<sup>14</sup> Now there is no reason to suppose that when he conceived the play Renard felt resentful or cynical about the woman herself or their former relationship. On the contrary, after the premiere, he wrote in his diary:

Cela ne m'arrive pas souvent, mais je pense à la vraie. Si elle s'était vue hier soir, elle aurait pleuré de douces larmes. A neuf ans de distance elle m'aurait aimé, mais la vie ne permet pas ces choses-là, qui seraient les plus exquis.<sup>15</sup>

The nostalgic tone, and the assumption that Danièle Davyle would have appreciated the play, strongly indicate that Le Plaisir de rompre was a wistful tribute to a love affair, and not a caustic exposure of its hollowness, as Catulle Mendès suggested in his review.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, a few days later, Renard noted that his former image in the eyes of the public as a cynic had been changed by the play:

Ils ne devinaient pas mes qualités d'émotion. L'Ecornifleur, Poil de Carotte, n'étaient que féroces. Il leur a fallu Le Plaisir de rompre, c'est-à-dire de l'émotion démonstrative.<sup>17</sup>

The implication is clear: in this play he has made manifest his capacity for the tenderer emotions.

Yet even if it is so, a painful parting seems hardly more promising than bitter scepticism as the basis of a comedy. If, notwithstanding the soberer emotions it evokes, Le Plaisir de rompre remains a comedy, it is largely on account of its lines. There is abundant wit in the dialogue, and it is not simply a surface ornament, either, but is integrated with some skill into the substance of the play. Renard actually calls attention to it in order to show its relation to the situation:

Blanche - Vous avez de l'esprit, ce soir.

Maurice - C'est le bouquet de mon dernier feu d'artifice (61).<sup>18</sup>

He is full of witticisms not only because that is a normal part of his shallow and artificial character, nor because he is pretending too hard to be at his ease, but because he intends to be witty: it is his way of doing honour to a special occasion. True, some of his sallies are forced and some rather lack taste, but many are genuinely amusing, and by his barrage of banter Maurice manages to maintain an atmosphere of brittle gaiety in the play until the turning point of the letter. In a play which has so few real events and which depends so much on contrasts in personality and on modulations in mood, Maurice's breezy performance has a vital part to play.

The plot of Renard's next play was if anything even less eventful than that of Le Plaisir de rompre. Created by Lucien Guitry and Marthe Brandès at one of the Figaro's Monday matinees on 14 March 1898, Le Pain de ménage was all talk, both literally and figuratively. It was simply a brief verbal



flirtation between a couple left alone together by their respective spouses.<sup>19</sup>

As in Le Plaisir de rompre, movement and gesture are of very minor importance: words constitute the action and create the play's shape. No external factor (like the letter in Le Plaisir de rompre) is introduced to catalyze the action. The rising action is constituted by Pierre's attempt to talk Marthe - and himself - into running away together; the falling action, by her exposure of the proposal as an impractical daydream.

Both plays were similar, in their style and content, to the dialogue mondain, which was a literary genre then much in vogue, practised notably by "Gyp", "Jeanne Marni", Lavedan and Renard himself. Even the technique was somewhat the same, in that the literary dialogue often plunged in medias res, prepared few of its effects and kept explanations to the barest minimum. Le Plaisir de rompre has no distinct exposition; needful information is simply supplied piecemeal as required. Much the same could be said of Le Pain de ménage, with the exception of two blatantly expository speeches early in the piece. In the first, scorning any attempt to be life-like, Marthe baldly informs us and the putative father that Pierre's daughter was out of sorts at dinner so Berthe is now sitting up with her. She even points the direction of the child's room for Pierre's benefit. In a pendent to this incident, Pierre later needlessly apprises Marthe that her husband Alfred has gone to bed, gesturing to remind her where her room is.<sup>20</sup>

Such clumsy coaching of the audience is not characteristic of the play's technique, however. In the main, the few

things it is useful to know emerge discreetly here and there in the conversation: that Pierre is thirty-five and has been married to Berthe for twelve years; that Alfred and Marthe are their guests in the country and their neighbours in town; and that in temperament Berthe and Marthe are pretty much like the biblical Martha and Mary respectively. The audience needs no other background information. The slender action is determined by the personalities of the protagonists, as revealed through their dialogue.

Even more than Le Plaisir de rompre, this little comedy derives much of its appeal from the sparkling deftness of its lines. Le Pain de ménage is in fact much the wittier play: the repartee is better turned and more abundant because Pierre is cleverer than Maurice, and he is also ably seconded by Marthe. Blanche's speeches were touchingly subdued, in effective contrast with Maurice's feu d'artifice, but Marthe is a very alert conversationalist in her own right:

Pierre - A chaque trait qui vous frappe, vous étincelez.

Marthe - Je place mon mot, comme une autre, à l'occasion (87).

And indeed, if Pierre is the more fluent and fanciful talker, Marthe is quick on her cues and has a pleasantly dry irony. Her airy assurance that "Nous sommes les deux personnes les plus spirituelles que nous connaissions" (86) is probably jocular, but may not be without some foundation.

Witty as it is, however, some have felt that the play's gaiety is not unalloyed. Sir Harold Hobson's opinion was that

What in fact makes Jules Renard's plays memorable, and unlike any others, is not their sharp wit, nor their skill in dialogue, remarkable as these are, but that in each of them Renard, like Judas, went

out and hanged himself in contrition.

This is evident, though lightly, in Le Pain de ménage.<sup>21</sup> Others too have pointed to sombre emotions in the play. One critic found amertume in it, and the playwright himself hinted that its subject was "le malheur dans le bonheur."

Yet contrition, amertume and malheur seem unduly grave words to apply to so mild and benign a comedy. It is hard to accept that Pierre and Marthe's situation or behaviour propounds bitter truths about human baseness or misfortune, or about the shortcomings of marriage. Their discontent is not really serious and neither is the threat to their marriages: we know it and they know it. Early in the piece, before Pierre has proposed an affair between them, Marthe marks out precise bounds within which the game of flirtation may be played:

L'idée perverse m'amuse d'abord, mais je sens vite que la chose n'aurait rien de drôle, n'importe quand et n'importe avec qui. Pour que l'image de l'adultère ne me fasse pas baisser d'écoeurement les yeux, il faut qu'elle reste dans le vague et dans le lointain (83).

The audience watches the play with the comfortable reassurance that Pierre and Marthe are in no real danger from the risks they appear to be taking, with such a safety-net spread beneath them.

Marthe's sharp distinction between l'idée and la chose is highly significant. It is notable that the physical aspect of adultery is consistently played down, amusingly presented by Pierre as something secondary, almost an after-thought:

Marthe - Nous y voilà, aux réalités!

Pierre - Nous y voilà, parce que vous y faites allusion. Vous, les femmes, vous pensez toujours à ça!

Marthe - Et vous n'y pensez jamais, vous, les hommes?

Pierre - Pas tout de suite. Il va sans dire que, l'heure venue, je saurais très bien embrasser une femme (91).

As for Marthe, in her imagined account of their flight, the actual infidelity is literally only parenthetical: "Mais là, après une nuit d'hôtel (car nous aurions dormi côte à côte, inévitablement, il aurait bien fallu)..." (92). The wording is masterly, packed with comic significance.

If not imperious desire, what then has drawn Pierre and Marthe into extramarital complicity? By their own account, it seems that what they miss most in their marriages is the pleasant intoxication of uttering or accepting pretty gallantries:

Pierre - Et ces gentillesse-là, est-ce votre mari qui vous les dirait?

Marthe - Il m'en a dit.

Pierre - Il ne vous en dit plus.

Marthe - Quelques-unes.

Pierre - Pas souvent.

Marthe - Quelquefois.

Pierre - Il vous en dira de moins en moins, je vous l'affirme (87).

What Pierre has to offer is not physical attractions superior to Alfred's (the question is expressly and amusingly evaded), but an exceptional talent for amorous cajolery which he cannot exercise on Berthe: "Je ne peux pas, moi qui aime tant ça, moi qui suis né exprès pour ça, filer à ses pieds des phrases d'amour" (88).

The idea implied here, that it is his gift for marivaudage which is his very essence, is heard again when he pleads with Marthe:

Ne refusez pas ce que j'ai de meilleur, ma façon de faire la cour à une femme, de lui prodiguer les tendresses fugitives, les menus soins, les petits cadeaux, les galanteries, les bagatelles nécessaires, et de lui parler une langue inconnue d'elle. Je vous jure que je suis un vrai poète et que je possède le don de charmer (90).

This important speech, so interesting in several respects, perhaps provides the key to Pierre's significance and so to their relationship. He is above all the possessor of a magic language. He accounts himself a poet; she calls him "charmant troubadour"; and in truth their dalliance is only a kind of poem, a mirage conjured up by words.

Le Pain de ménage has sometimes been likened to the one-act comedies and proverbes of Musset, and indeed it would be relatively easy to show its affinities in both content and manner with plays like Un Caprice or Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée. Less apparent, perhaps, is a certain resemblance to the work of Renard's friend Rostand. Yet inasmuch as Pierre is a romantic and impractical troubadour whose eloquence charms but does not win him his lady, he has counterparts in Rostand's Jaufré Rudel and Cyrano. If Renard's comedy depicts fancy-led dreams at odds with a prosaic reality, this is a theme frequently treated by Rostand, perhaps most notably in Les Romanesques, staged four years earlier. There is more than a touch of Percinet in Pierre, and Marthe's devastating prediction of their flight to Marseilles together is like an exemplum of Percinet's rueful words in Les Romanesques (III, iv): "Ce n'est pas amusant du tout, les aventures!"

Percinet had to learn this lesson the hard way: Pierre is luckier. By calling his bluff, Marthe makes him face the same fact without anyone getting hurt. Even his disillusion-

ment is not too painful, perhaps even tinged with relief, because despite the male swagger he feels obliged to affect, he seems no more ready than she is for real infidelity. Renard's comedy was not just another adultery play, because what passes between Pierre and Marthe is no more than the titillating but harmless fantasy which two fin-de-siècle worldlings use to beguile their boredom. In Louis Pauwels' perfect phrase, Le Pain de ménage is actually "la comédie de la fidélité."<sup>22</sup>

Many of Renard's admirers still think Le Pain de ménage the finest of his plays, but it was his next which was to bring him most celebrity and acclaim as a dramatist.

Quite the best account of Poil de Carotte is the lecture Renard gave to the Amicale de la Nièvre in 1904. Besides being uniquely authoritative, it is so acute and detailed in its analysis that it is unnecessary to comment at any length on the adaptation process or on the main features of the play it produced. Suffice it to say that the play was once again derived from an existing narrative work which had a significant autobiographical content. The collection of stories entitled Poil de Carotte was published in 1894 and proved a success. Léon Guichard has shown that by 1898, Renard had begun exploring the possibility of a stage version.<sup>23</sup>

His first attempt seems to have been quite ambitious: the author envisaged a three-act play, with a larger cast, more incidents, and utilizing more of the episodes of the book than in the definitive version.

Gilbert Sigaux has suggested that the reduction to a single act was probably carried out in the spring and summer of 1899.<sup>24</sup> The resulting script may have been read first to

Renard's friend Tristan Bernard. At all events, on 29 November 1899, Renard read a version of the play to Antoine, who was very enthusiastic about it, requested it for the Théâtre-Antoine, and promised to play M. Lepic himself.

A month later, the playwright read the text to the actor Lucien Guitry, a close friend. He was as impressed as Antoine, but at Renard's request he also offered criticisms on points of detail, some of them very shrewd. Guitry thought Renard should submit his play to the Comédie-Française, and he was also keen to play M. Lepic himself; but, considering himself contracted to Antoine, Renard declined his suggestions.

On 12 January 1900, Renard wrote to Antoine asking about his intentions for Poil de Carotte and outlining some of the changes he had made to the text. As far as one can judge, these appear to have tended towards still greater economy and concision. A month later, the production had progressed to the point that Renard was able to inspect a maquette of the set and attend a rehearsal, though Antoine himself was not present. The Journal reflects Renard's anxieties about Antoine's apparent nonchalance, but as rehearsals continued apace throughout February things fell into place, culminating in a triumphant opening on 2 March 1900.

Despite Renard's fears, the mise en scène and the acting were excellent. Lugné-Poe's wife Suzanne Després was brilliant as Poil de Carotte, one of the great roles of her career. Antoine gave a very fine, subtle performance as M. Lepic, and Ellen Andrée as Mme Lepic and Renée Maupin as Annette were also admirable. The play had 125 performances in Paris alone in its first year, and it has since remained one of the most popular plays of the period.

To judge from what we know of reactions to the original production, the chief appeal of Poil de Carotte was the touching story it told. Renard seems to have borne in mind the lesson of Le Plaisir de rompre and put his trust once again in "émotion démonstrative". As was usual with the stage adaptations of his books, the play is softer and less astringent in tone than the original work. Father and son show more overt vulnerability and emotion, and M. Lepic is made mellow, as witness his speeches in scene ix in mitigation of Mme Lepic's embittered character. The playwright was aware of the change in mood and well content with it: "C'est un progrès, une supériorité, je crois."<sup>25</sup>

The character of Poil de Carotte has also been somewhatedulcorated, though less obviously. In the book he was at times genuinely exasperating, but his behaviour on stage is no longer difficult, merely piquant. The sum total of his naughtiness consists in accidentally breaking a bowl, shaking a fist in his mother's general direction, and telling Annette a couple of entirely innocuous lies. In scene iii, to be sure, he rattles off a whole list of his faults:

Je suis menteur, hypocrite, malpropre, ce qui ne m'empêche pas d'être paresseux et têtu...  
(...) J'ai le coeur sec et je ronfle... Il y a peut-être autre chose... Ah! je boude, et c'est même là peut-être le principal de mes défauts;

but the audience is given no grounds for endorsing most of these charges. Besides, the list is manifestly quoted by rote from Mme Lepic. In fact, rather than convincing us of his vices, the open-faced, meek recital tends to make sentimental audiences credit the speaker with the virtue of humility.

On the other hand, Mme Lepic's character has not been



softened in the stage version: rather the contrary. Some critics have felt that the one-act format has unduly condensed her malice, obliging her to bully and torment Poil de Carotte more often than is plausible in a mere twenty minutes or so. She appears as unremittingly unjust, inquisitive, false, sly and cruel, and her wholly negative portrayal by Renard has evoked two particular criticisms. First, from 1900 to the present day there have always been those who have objected strongly to the play as a slur on motherhood in general. Second, there are critics who find the characterization distasteful as an immoderate, personal, rather dastardly public attack on a particular individual.

While Renard was preparing Poil de Carotte for production, his friend Lucien Guitry (who presumably was familiar with Renard's background) cautioned him: "Il ne faut pas que Poil de Carotte ait l'air d'une vengeance de Jules Renard." Although he heeded the warning to the extent of recording it in his diary (29 December 1890), the playwright does not appear to have avoided the pitfall. Those aware that Poil de Carotte and its sequel La Bigote are largely autobiographical often get the unpleasant impression that in these works the dramatist was rancorously settling personal scores with his mother.

This was partly the reason why Hobson preferred Le Plaisir de rompre and Le Pain de ménage to this more famous play:

In Poil de Carotte Renard is concerned crudely to blacken his mother's character, to show that in her behaviour to himself as a child she had been uniformly unkind. (...) It is too obviously determined to show Mme Lepic, Poil de Carotte's mother, as a monster.

So resolute is this determination that one ends

by wondering whether there might not, after all, be something to be said on her side. Indeed there was, although it never occurred to Renard to say it.<sup>26</sup>

The last point is not entirely fair. Although the playwright can hardly be said to put Mme Lepic's case, we have seen that he does at least briefly acknowledge, in scene ix, that she may have one. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate Hobson's main contention about the negative effect of gross, self-serving bias.

Inevitably, there is a subjective factor in such judgments. In Pierre Voltz's opinion, for example,

Renard s'interdit toute intervention personnelle, toute thèse; ainsi la peinture de l'enfant malheureux à travers Poil de Carotte pourrait tourner au plaidoyer romantique: il n'en est rien, car Renard refuse délibérément la qualité d'enfant martyr. La vérité du portrait est ainsi sauvegardée et la vertu comique du texte conservée.<sup>27</sup>

One could accept such a claim as justified with regard to the book, perhaps, but its validity for the play is more doubtful. The play lays less stress on Poil de Carotte's real shortcomings, while his mother remains at least as vicious as in the book, upsetting the balance of their relationship, so that her malice and his sufferings appear too incomprehensibly unjust. One is inclined to disagree that Renard has sufficiently heeded Guitry's warning: "Il ne faut pas que Poil de Carotte soit un martyr",<sup>28</sup> or that the characterization is wholly appropriate to a play with pretensions to realism: it is too black-or-white, too Dickensian.

In other respects, where Renard's personal feelings were less involved, the transition from page to stage has been managed very skilfully. The original work has been re-thought

in dramatic terms much more radically than in Docquois's adaptation of La Demande, for instance. The book was constructed à tiroirs. As the author observed, episodes could be added to it or taken from it at will (or, for that matter, their sequence changed). The play, though, has a definite direction and shape, and that shape is quite a conventional one theatrically.

The book as a whole certainly had an over-all "meaning", but this was generated by the joint effect of coordinate tableaux. The play has a very similar - if rather less pungent - total meaning, but now achieves it through a linear plot, centred on whether or not Poil de Carotte will go hunting with his father. This plot offers the normal features of complication, crisis, climax and resolution, disposed in the usual dramatic curve.

The book was structured, albeit loosely, around Poil de Carotte himself, who provides the sole link between otherwise independent episodes. In the play, although he remains on stage throughout, his structural significance is quite different. The playwright has substantially increased in extent and importance the roles of M. Lepic, now in effect sharing the lead, and of the new servant, Annette.

Although she appeared only briefly in the book, Annette is now the key to the play's structure. Her arrival provides a fairly natural pretext for a full-scale, formal exposition, which occupies most of scene iii, with some supplementary information in scene iv. Being a newcomer to the Lepic household, Annette is in much the same position as the spectator, and in scene iii, both are given a certain amount of essential factual information about the household by Poil de Carotte.

Subsequently, she starts to form opinions about the Lepics, opinions which are for the most part substantially those of the audience, though she is temporarily misled by Mme Lepic's hypocrisy, which the audience, being better informed, is able to recognize for what it is. For much of the play, Annette is as it were the audience's representative inside the play, seeing things much as the spectator sees them and expressing reactions similar to his.

It is Annette who intervenes in scene vi to break the deadlock imprisoning the Lepic family in an unhappy lie. Her action reveals to M. Lepic the sly bullying and misrepresentation to which his son has been subjected, and releases Poil de Carottte from the silence imposed on him by his mother. This produces the play's climax, a sort of double anagnorisis when M. Lepic and Poil de Carotte each comes to realize the other's misery and their mutual affection, enabling the two to draw closer together, supporting each other and allied against Mme Lepic.

As this outline shows, in Poil de Carotte Renard was beginning to use a more conventionally "dramatic" form than that of Le Plaisir de rompre and Le Pain de ménage, the saynète barely differentiated from the literary dialogue. The greater number of characters involved permits more complex inter-relations; exits and entrances within the course of the action allow abrupt changes of mood and situation; and physical action is used more extensively and much more significantly, as can be seen even by simply comparing the stage-directions with those of the two previous pieces. In short, its dramaturgy is more or less in line with the play-making practices of its time, and it could be said that Poil de

Carotte is a fairly well-made play.

To a greater extent than before, for instance, the playwright calculates and prepares his effects well in advance. The first scene buoys Poil de Carotte up with the happy anticipation of going with his father to make more effective his plunge into disappointment in scene v, which in its turn enhances the happy reversal of scene vi.

In scene v, Poil de Carotte's fortunes are at their lowest ebb, and the playwright increases the tension by leading him (and the audience) to believe M. Lepic irrevocably gone: "Au revoir, papa, bonne chasse!" This effective fausse sortie turns on the business with the dog, and this has been scrupulously prepared by scene ii, which indeed has no other function (unless it be to act as a liaison-scene separating M. Lepic's exit from Annette's entrance).

The tiny scene ii is also interesting because it shows that in adopting the devices of conventional playmaking, Renard has not always disdained its less reputable tricks, for it is a soliloquy, one of the least realistic of theatrical conventions. There is actually another, of sorts, at the end of the fourth scene: "Rasée, ma partie de chasse!" Ça m'apprendra, une fois de plus!" and the fact that this audible reaction is overhead (and even anticipated, apparently) by Mme Lepic only highlights its artificiality. It is still more surprizing that in spite of Renard's express disapproval of the unrealistic a-parte,<sup>29</sup> scene iii opens with something very like one, for what else is "Tiens, ce n'est pas Mme Lepic"?

Poil de Carotte was basically realistic in style, especially as compared with most commercial drama of its time,

but Larroumet was not totally correct in writing, in his Le Temps review of 5 March 1900, that it was a play "sans le plus léger sacrifice à la convention théâtrale." Renard was to become "plus malin" in later works, but he does make some use in Poil de Carotte of the accepted tricks of the trade. Yet what made him an interesting dramatist, particularly in the comedies to 1900, was not technical slickness, but a special sobriety in his subjects and in his handling of them, a gift for knowing what to leave understated or even unstated, and a characteristic mood.

In this connection, it might be advisable to conclude by justifying Renard's inclusion in this study, even though it comes as something of a surprize that the comic nature of his theatre should have been called into question by the excellent Gilbert Sigaux in Un Siècle d'humour théâtral (p.204):

"Aucune de ces pièces (...) n'est à proprement parler drôle; aucune ne vise pas à faire rire."

It is clear that Renard himself intended comedy to have a place in these plays. The wit which seasons the dialogue of Le Plaisir de rompre and, more copiously and entertainingly still, that of Le Pain de ménage was surely intended to make an audience laugh outright:

Pierre - C'est désolant! Ah! nous en viderons des coupes de joie, aux noces d'argent, aux noces d'or!

Marthe - Aux noces de diamant.

Pierre - Rien que des orgies, toute la vie, jusqu'à la mort!

Marthe - C'est accablant (90).

The paradox of their ironic dismay at the prospect of a lifetime of felicity and the extravagance of the hyperbole are unmistakably comic. Besides, the Journal tells us how

anxiously Renard hovered back-stage during the performance of Le Plaisir de rompre to hear how his sallies went down with the public, how heartily Guitry laughed at the "mot sur Pascal" in Le Pain de ménage. The indications are that these plays were intended and received as what Goldsmith specified as "laughing comedy".

Poil de Carotte may well have been a more serious play, in various respects, but it too has its moments of humour, and by no means all of them are as black and bitter as the too famous line "Tout le monde ne peut pas être orphelin." The grown-up airs Poil de Carotte affects with Annette, and the indulgent irony of her replies, are very amusing comedy, for example. Once again, the comic intention of the play is confirmed by Renard himself. In the 1904 lecture on Poil de Carotte he spoke appreciatively of the sure-fire comic effect of the jeu de scène Antoine devised for the closing of the shutters in scene vii (now incorporated into the script).<sup>30</sup> The same lecture also contained the revealing remark that when the play is performed there is a risk that "l'actrice qui joue le rôle de la servante Annette ne le joue pas assez comique pour mettre le public en train."<sup>31</sup> Nothing could make it clearer that the playwright thought the comic note was the right note for his play.

It is obvious from the reviews that the audiences of the original production found it both poignant and funny. Victor de Cottens (admittedly not one of the most profound of critics) described the play in the Gil Blas (3 March 1900) as "Rigolo en diable," which is no doubt excessive.

Nobody would maintain that any of the plays considered here aimed solely to amuse. Let us also duly recognize that

despite his reputation for bitterness and even cruelty, the playwright actually showed a marked fondness for affecting endings directed at the audience's sensibility. Yet this does not preclude comedy or even laughter, though it may sometimes be that "laughter through tears" normally associated with Chekhov's comedies.



Jules Renard: Footnotes

1. Cogny, Le Naturalisme, 107.
2. Cogny, op. cit., 105.
3. Hobson, 26.
4. For Journal entries, the date is given here, to allow reference to any edition.  
Journal, 26 November 1899.
5. Théâtre complet (ed. Gilbert Sigaux), 312.
6. Journal, 15 March 1898.
7. Lugli, 1-2.
8. Preface to Théâtre complet, 11-12.
9. Théâtre complet, 311.
10. Journal, 22 April 1903.
11. Actor, journalist, novelist and dramatist (1863-1927), who subsequently wrote some twenty undistinguished works, mostly vaudevilles and revues, for minor theatres. Renard had known him since 1893 at least. For an account of the writing of the play, see Léon Guichard, L'Oeuvre et l'âme de Jules Renard, 452 and the second volume of the Pléiade edition of Renard's Oeuvres (Paris, Gallimard, 1971), 569.
12. In Oeuvres, 2, 601, Guichard describes this as a "gentil succès".
13. Jules Lemaître in the Revue des Deux Mondes, 1 April 1897.
14. See Rachilde in Nouvelles Littéraires, 2 February 1929 and in Portraits d'hommes, and Dussane, "Le Style Jules Renard".
15. Journal, 16 March 1897.
16. In Le Journal, 17 March 1897.
17. Journal, 2 April 1897.
18. Since Le Plaisir de rompre and Le Pain de ménage are not divided into scenes, references are given here to pages in the Théâtre complet.
19. Le Pain de ménage is accepted as being another play derived from Renard's personal experience, though his precise relation to the plot is not completely clear. He was very anxious about Rostand's reaction to the play, and it used to be thought that this was because Pierre was Renard and Marthe was Mme Rostand. An alternative theory, though, is that Pierre was Rostand himself, and

Marthe a friend as yet unidentified. It would still seem rather crass of Renard if he was capitalizing on a delicate confidence involving a friend, but perhaps less so than in the other case.

20. The unlikelike symmetry between these speeches (and gestures) is mitigated somewhat if Pierre's speech can be taken as a deliberate, parodic parallel to Marthe's.
21. Hobson, 30.
22. Jules Renard, Théâtre complet (ed. L. Pauwels), Paris, Le Béliet, 1957, 80.
23. L'Oeuvre et l'âme de Jules Renard, 359-60.
24. Théâtre complet, 98.
25. Ibid., 325.
26. Hobson, 32-34.
27. Voltz, 162.
28. Journal, 29 December 1899.
29. "-J'admets fort bien les a-parte au théâtre, dit Capus. Ça évite bien des choses. - Ça évite bien du talent." (Journal, 17 November 1898).
30. Théâtre complet, 319.
31. Ibid, 323.

ALFRED JARRY (1873-1907)

Alfred-Henri Jarry was born of middle-class parents in Laval on 8 September 1873. He was brought up and educated first in Laval, then in Saint-Brieuc and Rennes, finally moving to Paris in June 1891 to finish his schooling at the Lycée Henri IV. There he was a schoolfellow of Léon-Paul Fargue and for a time a pupil of Bergson.

A rather precocious boy, Jarry had been writing since about 1885, but his literary career proper began on 19 April 1893 with the publication of a poem which had won a prize in the monthly literary competition of Marcel Schwob's Echo de Paris littéraire illustré. On 23 April, the same periodical published another prize-winning text by Jarry entitled Guignol, in which Ubu made his first public appearance. Further pieces by Jarry were published in 1893 and 1894 by the Echo de Paris, Louis Lormel's L'Art littéraire and the Mercure de France (in which, in a rare moment of affluence, Jarry became a shareholder). On 5 October 1894, the Editions du Mercure de France published his first book: Les Minutes de sable mémorial.

At about the same time, Jarry and Rémy de Gourmont launched a review called L'Ymagier, chiefly devoted to prints and woodcuts, including some of Jarry's own. The magazine ran for eight numbers, but Jarry withdrew after the fifth, having fallen out with Gourmont.

He was called up for three years military service in November 1894, but granted a medical discharge in 1895. In October of that year, the Editions du Mercure de France brought out his second book, César-Antéchrist, one section

of which was a version of Ubu roi. In March 1896, Jarry started a new revue d'estampes named Perhinderion, but publication ceased with the second number in June.

By this time, however, Jarry had become increasingly involved with the theatre. He and his friend Fargue had been interested by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre since its first season and by the beginning of 1896, he was corresponding with Lugné-Poe about the possibility of producing a play there. Initially, he hesitated between Ubu roi and Les Polyèdres (later retitled Ubu cocu), but finally decided on Ubu roi, and the text of the play was published by Paul Fort in his monthly review Le Livre d'art in April and May 1896.

Soon after, Jarry was engaged by Lugné as the theatre's secrétaire-régisseur and threw himself energetically into his functions as secretary cum assistant stage-manager cum publicity manager. He rendered very valuable services in helping to prepare Lugné's production of Ibsen's Peer Gynt (12 November 1896). Jarry even appeared in the play as an actor, playing - inevitably - a troll.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, his own project was maturing. The text of Ubu roi had been republished in book form in June. In September, the Mercure de France had published Jarry's important theoretical article De l'inutilité du théâtre au théâtre.<sup>2</sup> On 1 December, the Revue blanche carried Jarry's Paralipomènes d'Ubu.

The générale and première of Ubu roi were staged by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre on 9 and 10 December 1896.<sup>3</sup> The performance was mauled by the majority of the press, and Jarry replied in the article Questions de théâtre, published in the Mercure on 1 January 1897.

Apart from these two performances of Ubu roi, none of Jarry's theatrical works were staged by legitimate theatres in his lifetime; but on Christmas Eve 1897, he and his friend Claude Terrasse opened a Théâtre des Pantins where a puppet production of Ubu roi was presented on 20 January 1898. In November 1901, the Guignol des Gueules de Bois staged Ubu sur la Butte at the 4-Z'Arts cabaret in the boulevard de Clichy.

Besides this and a few other puppet plays, Jarry collaborated on a number of opéras-bouffes, to music by Claude Terrasse, in the last years of his short life.<sup>4</sup> Undermined by chronic ill-health and perpetual poverty, he died of tubercular meningitis on 1 November 1907 at the age of thirty-four.

The question of the origin and authorship of Ubu roi, which was the subject of such heated controversy after the publication of Charles Chassé's pamphlet Sous le masque d'Alfred Jarry(?) in 1921, is now of interest to hardly anyone. It seems accepted on every hand that when Jarry entered the Lycée de Rennes in 1888, he found already in existence there a veritable cycle of schoolboy skits burlesquing M. Hébert, a physics teacher; that his friend and classmate Henri Morin and - even more - Morin's elder brother Charles had been prominent in the collective elaboration of this scurrilous folklore; and that a mock-heroic sketch from the cycle, Les Polonais, was at the very least the estoire on which Ubu roi was based. It has been established that several performances of Les Polonais, in live, puppet and shadow-play versions, took place at the Morin and Jarry homes between 1888 and 1890.

The original manuscript which Charles Morin says he wrote in a schoolboy notebook has not been found, and despite the subtle deductions of scholars, it has not proved possible to determine the extent of any contributions Jarry may have made to the work, either in the Rennes years or subsequently. Even the style and the humour of Ubu roi as we have it are substantially the same as those of Ubu enchaîné, which is generally taken to be largely, if not entirely, of Jarry's making.

However, the point of recent textual scrutiny of Ubu roi has not been so much to settle a dispute about literary property, which no longer seems very relevant. It seems that for most of its many modern commentators, the most interesting question about the play is not whether Jarry made it, but what Jarry made of it.

Ubu roi was given its première by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre at the Nouveau-Théâtre on 10 December 1896, the générale having taken place the previous day. Firmin Gémier, lent by the Odéon, played Ubu and Louise France was Mère Ubu. Jarry himself had designed the actors' masks and collaborated on the scenery with Sérusier, Pierre Bonnard, Ranson, Toulouse-Lautrec and Vuillard. The music was composed and played by Bonnard's brother-in-law Claude Terrasse. The writer A.-F. Herold was machiniste in charge of the lighting, and the play was directed by Lugné-Poe, who incorporated various properties, details of costume and jeux de scène suggested by Jarry.<sup>5</sup>

The evening opened with a short address by Jarry. Dressed in baggy black, his hair plastered down and his face whitened, he introduced the work in terms more obscure than

provocative, though tinged with characteristic irony and humour. In any case, his nervous remarks were made in such a low voice that most spectators caught only the occasional phrase.

Then the curtain rose on a truly extraordinary stage setting. Among several eye-witness descriptions, the most picturesque is perhaps that given by Arthur Symons in Studies in Seven Arts:

The scenery was painted to represent, by a child's conventions, indoors and out of doors, and even the torrid, temperate, and arctic zones at once. Opposite to you, at the back of the stage, you saw apple-trees in bloom, under a blue sky, and against the sky a small closed window and a fireplace, containing an alchemist's crucible, through the very midst of which (...) trooped in and out these clamorous and sanguinary persons of the drama. On the left was painted a bed, and at the foot of the bed a bare tree, and snow falling. On the right were palm-trees, about one of which coiled a boa-constrictor; a door opened against the sky, and beside the door a skeleton dangled from a gallows. Changes of scene were announced by the simple Elizabethan method of a placard, roughly scrawled with such stage directions as this: 'La scène représente la province de Livonie couverte de neige.' A venerable gentleman in evening-dress, Father Time as we see him on Christmas-trees, trotted across the stage on the points of his toes between every scene, and hung the new placard on its nail. <sup>6</sup>

According to Gémier's account, recorded a quarter century after the event,<sup>7</sup> the générale had gone along well enough until Act III scene v, when things had turned ugly. On the night of the première, however, according to the consensus of expert opinion the trouble began from the moment when Gémier, grotesque in his postiche gidouille, pronounced the play's first word. At this the audience erupted into tumult unequalled in the French theatre since the bataille d'Hernani. Eventually Gémier and Louise France managed to regain some measure of control and the play con-

tinued, though still interrupted at frequent intervals by the restive public, notably on each of the thirty-two occasions that the offending word was repeated. Despite this, the work was played out to its end; and the factional strife it had aroused moved out of the theatre and into the review columns of the newspapers.

The performance of Ubu roi was a landmark in French theatrical history, and several perceptive members of the audience seem to have sensed at once that, for better or for worse, something more than the word merdre had been added to the vocabulary of drama that night.

Romain Coolus, writing in the Revue Blanche (1 January 1900) discerned the potentialities of the production's strange stagecraft:

Il convient de signaler certains détails de mise en scène particulièrement heureux. Le décor ne changeant pas, il s'agissait d'évoquer, au lieu de les représenter directement, les divers lieux où s'évoluait l'action; pour cela on a eu recours à un certain nombre de signes susceptibles de suggérer ce qu'on ne pouvait montrer: quelques actions en raccourci très expressivement synthétiques - la course; la montée de la colline; la bataille; - constituent une sorte de langage théâtral nouveau sur lequel il y aura lieu de revenir.

Time has borne out this opinion.

Catulle Mendès, in his review for Le Journal (11 December 1896), criticized many aspects of both play and production, but saw in Ubu himself a powerful new myth:

Croyez-le, malgré les niaiseries de l'action et les médiocrités de la forme, un type nous est apparu, créé par l'imagination extravagante et brutale d'un homme presque enfant.

Le Père Ubu existe.

(...) Il existe désormais, inoubliable. Vous ne vous débarrasserez pas de lui; il vous hantera, il vous obligera sans trêve à vous souvenir qu'il fut, qu'il est; il deviendra une légende populaire des instincts vils, affamés et immondes; et M. Jarry,



que j'espère destiné à de plus délicates gloires,  
aura créé un masque infâme.

History has proved Mendès' prediction correct, too, and it is no mean thing to have created a new literary type.<sup>8</sup>

Yet W.B. Yeats perceived something even more significant in Jarry's play: the precursory signs of a whole new style of art. Recalling its tumultuous first performance in his Autobiographies, Yeats wrote:

Feeling bound to support the most spirited party, we have shouted for the play, but that night at the Hôtel Corneille I am very sad, for comedy, objectivity, has displayed its growing power once more. I say: 'After Stéphane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God.'" <sup>9</sup>

Ubu roi is commonly regarded nowadays as a radically new development in French drama; but some disagreement remains, both about this and about the extent to which Jarry himself understood and meant it to be revolutionary. Three basic interpretations of the play's intent appear to be possible. First, that it was a joke at the public's expense. Second, that it was a joke which the audience was expected to share. Third, that it was a deliberate attack on current notions about the theatre. Jarry has left a good number of writings relevant to the question, but unfortunately when they are taken together they produce equivocal or inconsistent answers.

The first view, that Ubu roi was a hoax, was widespread among the original audience, though some were uneasy, Jules Lemaître anxiously enquiring: "C'est bien une plaisanterie, n'est-ce pas?", and Jules Renard, writing in his diary (10 December 1896): "Si Jarry n'écrit pas demain qu'il s'est

moqué de nous, il ne s'en relèvera pas." Jarry himself nowhere confessed to a plain mystification, however.

In the letters to Lugné-Poe, Jarry does sometimes seem to be authorizing the second interpretation, since he is apparently assuming the audience's comprehension and goodwill when he describes the play as "d'un effet comique sûr", and "accessible à la majorité du public."<sup>10</sup> However, there are grounds to suspect special pleading here. It is clear from the letters that Jarry was more anxious to get his play produced than he cared to show, and it would be understandable if he were playing up its prospects of success and playing down its potential for scandal in order to reassure a distinctly hesitant Lugné.

At all events, other writings point rather to the third hypothesis:

Die Anmerkungen Jarrys zielen deutlich auf eine Erneuerung des Dramas überhaupt und enthalten ein dramaturgisches Programm, ungeachtet der Tatsache, dass das Stück Ubu roi ursprünglich als Persiflage gedacht war. <sup>11</sup>

As Hildegard Seipel indicates here, the original intention behind Les Polonais has no real bearing on the question. By being addressed to the general public instead of a schoolboy coterie, the work became subject to such a different frame of reference that it was effectively a new play - Ubu roi, not Les Polonais - and

Ses auteurs ne sont pas les élèves du Lycée de Rennes qui ont écrit la pièce, ce sont Jarry, Lugné-Poe, Gémier, qui l'ont jouée. Elle ne commence d'exister qu'à la représentation." <sup>12</sup>

Assuming, then (in company with most modern critics) that Ubu roi was intended as an instrument of dramatic reform, what sort of drama was it meant to promote? In the first place, Jarry appears as an early proponent of "theatricalism".

The technical suggestions in his letters to Lugné-Poe, his introductory address on opening night, his articles such as De l'inutilité du théâtre au théâtre and Questions de théâtre, and many details in the texts of his plays themselves point clearly to the conclusion that Jarry's theatre was fundamentally and deliberately anti-realistic.

It is true that there had already been reactions against the notion that it was the business of the stage to present a "slice of life" as nearly as possible indistinguishable from the real thing. The Théâtre d'Art and Théâtre de l'Oeuvre had been founded to this end; but even a playwright like Maeterlinck, who created his own imaginary world, was a quasi-realistic dramatist in the sense that he expected his audience "to take his personnages as persons and their gestures for the indications of a 'human' drama", as Ortega y Gasset expressed it. In other words, such a dramatist still hoped for that "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" which would enable his public to involve themselves with his fictitious characters' supposed problems for a couple of hours and lend themselves to the pretence that his imaginary world existed.

Jarry's approach was entirely different, rather more akin to that of Brecht, in that he forestalled illusion by systematically deploying a variety of alienating techniques, well described by Geneviève Serreau:

Il s'agissait d'étrangler une fois pour toutes la vraisemblance au théâtre en niant la réalité du temps par l'usage systématique des anachronismes, la réalité de l'espace par une confusion non moins systématique des lieux, et, à la limite, la réalité de l'homme, réduit sur la scène à des silhouettes masquées aux allures d'automate, à la voix monocorde, au langage rudimentaire ou cocassement altéré. 13

By such means, Jarry constantly stressed that his characters and their world were artificial and incredible. In his determination to dissipate any illusion of reality, he was like a puppet-master insistently drawing attention to the strings which activated his marionettes.

The simile is not fortuitously chosen. In his speech before the first performance, Jarry himself invited the audience to regard Ubu roi as a kind of puppet-play, and the similarities in technique between the Ubu cycle and the puppet theatre have been explored by a number of commentators, notably Arthur Symons, Henri Béhar and Jules Bedner.

The differences which normally exist between the legitimate and the puppet stages are of various orders. Many are clearly quite superficial: some of the most characteristic features of the puppet drama are mere conventions, traditionally associated in Western Europe with puppetry but not with the legitimate stage. It would be perfectly possible for the actors in stage plays to talk in squeaky voices and to bludgeon one another incessantly: it happens that usually they do not.

However, such superficial differences often derive from much more essential ones, and significantly the chief of these is the patent unreality of most puppet theatre. There are to be sure certain styles of puppetry which do aim at sustaining an illusion of human reality: the Japanese bunraku, for example, can be uncannily convincing. Most often, though, the sheer physical scale of the actors, the fixity of their expressions, and the visible presence of strings or rods condemn the puppet theatre to an artificiality even more blatant than that of the live stage.

Puppetry thus afforded an existing non-realistic dramatic tradition that Jarry could make use of in developing his own non-illusionist theatrical idiom:

Même à la fin du siècle, quand la reproduction de la réalité triomphait dans l'art dramatique, ce petit théâtre en marge échappait aux impératifs du réalisme. (...) Jarry a eu la chance de pratiquer tout jeune l'art des marionnettes. Il a eu le génie d'y découvrir un moyen de sortir le théâtre de l'impasse du naturalisme et de mettre son apprentissage pleinement à profit quand il abordait la grande scène, frayant ainsi, dès la fin du siècle dernier, la voie à un théâtre nouveau, théâtre de la caricature, soustrait aux catégories traditionnelles du temps, du lieu, de la vraisemblance. <sup>14</sup>

Puppets had much else to offer Jarry besides a precedent and a model for his non-mimetic theatrical aesthetic. Another fundamental and self-evident fact about them, for instance, is that they have no personality or purposes of their own: they are utterly at the service of the text. As Arthur Symons wrote, in his Apology for Puppets:

The living actor, even when he condescends to subordinate himself to the requirements of pantomime, has always what he is proud to call his temperament; in other words, so much personal caprice, which for the most part means wilful misunderstanding; and in seeing his acting you have to consider this intrusive little personality of his as well as the author's. The marionette may be relied upon. <sup>15</sup>

The same thinking was apparent in Edward Gordon Craig's call, in his book On the Art of the Theatre (1911), for the replacement of the actor, as traditionally understood, by what he calls the Über-Marionette, self-effacing and biddable. It was clearly this aspect of the nature of puppets which was uppermost in Jarry's mind when he said in his prefatory address:

Il a plu à quelques acteurs de se faire pour deux

soirées impersonnels et de jouer enfermés dans un masque, afin d'être bien exactement l'homme intérieur et l'âme des grandes marionnettes que vous allez voir.

Such an initiative was all the more striking and salutary in 1896, when the monstres sacrés still held sway over the greater part of the French theatre. Once again, it could be said that Jarry challenged conditions prevailing in the live theatre by appealing to the very different traditions of the puppet stage.

The fact that puppet actors are in themselves merely inert, inanimate objects had been suggested by Jules Bedner as one reason why the puppet theatre does not usually concern itself much with subtlety of characterization:

Il est clair que la tentation de marquer des nuances psychologiques n'existe guère pour des comédiens de bois, qui s'expriment tout en cris, en gestes, en acrobaties. <sup>16</sup>

Against this, however, it might be maintained that puppets are quite capable of conveying relatively subtle characterization when called on to do so by a Maeterlinck, say, or a Bouchor; and also that their normal simplicity may have to do with the kind of public to which the puppet theatre usually addresses itself.

The technical circumstance that one puppeteer may manipulate and lend his voice to several puppets, and that a puppet's mouth does not usually move to indicate that it is he who is "speaking", has fostered the practice of identifying the supposed speaker more clearly by giving each distinctive vocal or verbal idiosyncrasies. Mr. Punch's characteristic squeaky voice is familiar and readily identified, and verbal tags, catch-phrases and peculiar dialects abound in the puppet theatre. Jarry appears to have

carried this feature too into the plays of the Ubu cycle. Writing of the use of masked actors, in De l'inutilité, he noted: "Il va sans dire qu'il faut que l'acteur ait une voix spéciale, qui est la voix du rôle..." We know that Gémier evolved a special voice for Ubu, based in fact on Jarry's own extraordinary way of speaking, and that the other principals had a variety of accents: Mère Ubu faubourien, Bordure English, the Tsar exaggerated Slav and Queen Rosemonde broadest Cantal. The author also supplied many of the characters of the Ubu plays with puppet-like verbal labels and idiolects: Ubu's weird and characteristic oaths and use of the royal plural; Achras' catch-phrase "O c'est qué, voyez-vous bien..."; that of Ubu's conscience: "Monsieur, et ainsi de suite"; the anglicisms of Lord Catoblépas, and the deformations and porcine grunts of the Palotins.

Such devices do not produce characterization, in any worthwhile sense, merely a minimal and external differentiation, sufficient for the immediate needs of the action but without serious psychological pretensions. Jarry was not concerned to explain either his characters or the events in which they were involved in such a way as to convince:

Personen und Ereignisse des Geschehens sind antirealistisch konzipiert. Sie sind ins Monströse gesteigert, guignolesk, jenseits aller Psychologie und Wahrscheinlichkeit. 17

This allowed great freedom in the staging of the geste ubique and, once again, some of the techniques used were reminiscent of puppet practice. The device of indicating setting by placard, for instance, permitting frequent and immediate scene-changes, follows the usage of the Elizabethan stage, perhaps, but also that of the puppet

theatre. Similarly, the horses donned by the actors for equestrian scenes are probably identified by Anglo-Saxons with mumming-plays and morris-dances, but seem to be associated unhesitatingly by French commentators with puppetry.

The nature of puppet theatre allows the suspension of many of the physical laws binding on flesh-and-blood actors, and permits special effects prohibitively difficult to achieve on the legitimate stage. Jules Bedner, indeed, used difficulty of staging as a criterion in identifying elements in the Ubu plays probably borrowed from the puppet medium. Certainly inanimate actors would find it easier to comply with some of Jarry's hilariously high-handed stage directions: the enemies torn to pieces, the halves of the bisected Pissembock speaking in unison, and, of course, the ineffably matter-of-fact direction: "Un Palotin explose."

Yet in several of the instances cited by Bedner, it is perhaps not quite so easy as he implied to distinguish puppet dramaturgy from the more boisterous forms of the legitimate stage. In their tonality and their general conduct, the puppet play and broad farce often have much in common. In both, as a general rule, the appeal is visceral rather than cerebral, and the means of expression are as much physical and visual as they are verbal. Farce too has its pursuits, its flying missiles, its collapsing chairs, its pratfalls and its beatings. The crudity of the language in Ubu roi - not obscene, in fact, but insistently scatological<sup>18</sup> - may have shocked the first-nighters at the Oeuvre, but it had centuries of precedent in French farce.

Ubu roi, and for that matter the other plays of the Ubu



cycle, owed a great deal to the puppet theatre and to broad farce, then; but it would be a mistake to suppose that because Jarry imitated these popular genres he intended his plays to have the same kind of appeal.

The original schoolboy skit already contained elements of popular dramaturgy: negligent form, summary and exaggerated characters, indecorous language, rudimentary witticisms, slapstick and low humour, and a pervading spirit of boisterous hyperbole. Jarry retained these features, but he changed their purport when he proposed them to a very different audience. Perhaps he did so out of a straightforward desire to épater le bourgeois. Possibly, though, he was actuated by that deliberate primitivism which was such an interesting phenomenon in European culture around the turn of the century. Arthur Symons, the very type of the fin-de-siècle aesthete, interpreted the significance of Ubu roi in these terms:

It shows us that the artificial, when it has gone full circle, comes back to the primitive; des Esseintes relapses into the Red Indian. Jarry is logical, with that frightful irresistible logic of the French. In our search for sensation we have exhausted sensation; and now before a people who have perfected the fine shades to their vanishing point, who have subtilised delicacy of perception into the annihilation of the very senses through which we take in ecstasy, a literary Sansculotte has shrieked for hours that unspeakable word of the gutter which was the refrain, the Leitmotiv of this comedy of masks. <sup>19</sup>

Ubu roi is not genuinely primitive, like the paintings of Jarry's concitoyen Henri Rousseau. It has the sophisticated artlessness of Marcel Duchamps's ready-mades. Its true, involuted artificiality is well brought out by Symons' description of its pseudo-puppet actors as "living people pretending to be those wooden images of life which

pretend to be living people."<sup>20</sup> The popular airs of what Carola Giedion-Welcker nicely termed Jarry's Graffiti-Kunst were a sham, therefore, the exhilarating "slumming" of an aesthete.

It is notable that after its debt to the puppet play and to farce, Ubu roi was most reliant for its comic effect on an essentially learned form of humour: literary parody. As Judith Cooper wrote in her valuable monograph on the play:

Parody is one of the major elements of the comedy of Ubu roi and it is present on all levels of the play: in the basic plot, in the action of the individual episodes, in characterization and dialogue. <sup>21</sup>

The very title burlesqued Sophocles, and the epigraph pointed to two of the chief butts of the play's parody: its orthography and style suggested Rabelais, and Ubu was identified with Shakespeare.

The plot of Ubu roi is founded upon the same "Grand Mechanism" which Jan Kott has found underlying Macbeth, Richard II, and Richard III. Similarly, in Georges Polti's celebrated book Les Trente-six situations dramatiques, Ubu roi was cited with Macbeth and Richard III as specimens of his Type XXX.C1: "L'ambition, l'avidité entassant les crimes."

The affinity with Macbeth is manifest and close beyond any probability of mere coincidence. Both plays tell of a trusted captain incited by an ambitious wife to kill his king and seize the throne. After a series of despotic crimes, the usurper is finally defeated by an army raised in a neighbouring kingdom and led by the dead king's avenging son.

Though Bougrelas's general situation is akin to Malcolm's, Judith Cooper has suggested that he might also be a mock-heroic Hamlet, in that he is charged to destroy the usurper by the ghosts of his dynasty. Ghosts and apparitions occur in Macbeth, however, and in several Shakespearean plays; indeed they are not uncommon in Renaissance tragedy at large.

Queen Rosemonde's dream might put a French audience in mind of Pauline's forebodings in Polyeucte or, as André Lebois has noted,<sup>22</sup> Marie de Médicis' premonitions before the murder of Henri IV; but once again there is Shakespearean precedent in Julius Caesar.

Although it is often possible to propose specific originals like these, the parody is sometimes more general. Thus the battle scenes (Act IV, scenes iii and iv) seem to travesty half a dozen similar episodes in Shakespeare's histories and tragedies. Act II scene v is a splendid burlesque of nineteenth-century melodrama as a class: the quintessence of the genre is distilled into Bougrelas's plaintive cry: "O mon Dieu! qu'il est triste de se voir seul à quatorze ans avec une vengeance terrible à poursuivre!"

At the level of the dialogue, an unpublished thesis by Paul Jacopin<sup>23</sup> has painstakingly sifted the text for congruences like: "Come, put mine armour on; give me my staff," (Macbeth, V, iii) with "Ah! Mère Ubu, donne-moi ma cuirasse et mon petit bout de bois," (Ubu roi, III, viii).

Though less extensively used than parody, there are other effects which seem to assume a certain level of education. Names such as Stanislas Leczinski and Jean Sobieski take on an additional dimension for the spectator

acquainted with European history, just as a smattering of Latin gives point to Ubu's words in Act V scene i: "Omnis a Deo scientia, ce qui veut dire: Omnis, toute; a Deo, science; scientia, vient de Dieu."

While this sort of content is not particularly abstruse - about what one might expect of fairly bright fifteen-year-olds - the point is that there is in the play, in addition to the simple broad comedy, an element of rather bookish coterie humour.

Yet if some features of the play aimed over the heads of a genuinely popular audience, not every spectator who could recognize that Ubu roi played fast and loose with history and literature was thereby entitled to feel a cosy sense of complicity with Jarry. To be part of the play's vrai public was more than a matter of a decent education. Jarry's conception of the theatre, and indeed of art in general, was essentially elitist. When he wrote in De l'inutilité du théâtre au théâtre: "Nous ne comprenons pas cette idée d'un théâtre du peuple", he was not simply questioning Maurice Pottecher's initiative at Bussang but stating a general position shared by many leading Symbolists.<sup>24</sup>

In the third of the Douze arguments sur le théâtre,<sup>25</sup> he divided the theatrical public into two classes, "l'assemblée du petit nombre des intelligents et celle du grand nombre", and argued that since there are shows which cater to the multitude, the elite are also entitled to theirs. The same idea was expressed in De l'inutilité, where he quantified the global strength of those equipped to appreciate great art at around five hundred:

S'il y a dans tout l'univers cinq cents personnes qui soient un peu Shakespeare et Léonard par rapport à l'infinie médiocrité, n'est-il pas juste d'accorder à ces cinq cents bons esprits ce qu'on prodigue aux auditeurs de M. Donnay, le repos de ne pas voir sur la scène ce qu'ils ne comprennent pas, le plaisir actif de créer aussi un peu à mesure et de prévoir?

Jarry thus envisaged a characteristically Symbolist relation of the play to a small ideal audience, counting on their active and creative collaboration; but his intentions with regard to la multitude or la foule, as he called them, were very different. Ubu roi would appear to have exploited a virtually new kind of relationship between the playwright and his audience. Before Jarry, a dramatist could amuse, instruct, frighten, intrigue, appal or argue with his public; but Ubu roi irritated and revolted many of its spectators in a different way. It goes without saying that playwrights had deliberately shocked the public before, as Hugo did with Hernani, for example. But Hugo's impudent flouting of aesthetic prejudice can hardly be accounted the same as Jarry's full-blooded onslaught on the spectator's idea of a play and on the spectator himself.

David Grossvogel has implied that Jarry struck up this relationship with the audience by accident, through an error in judgment which betrayed itself from the play's opening word:

This word, though known to the spectators, was unacknowledged by the decorous part which they had lent temporarily to the ritual. Although it remains to be determined how much of its impact Jarry actually wished translated into laughter, laughter alone would have signified the successful absorption of the shock after the disturbance; in a comedy played according to the usual rules, this disturbance would have been wholly artificial. The fact that the audience could not re-establish its accustomed status through laughter shows that Ubu's initial intrusion did not conform to the standard contract. The spurious surface and the game were immediately

forgotten: there was a genuine assailant on stage. 26

Thus far, Grossvogel's analysis would probably be acceptable to most critics, but the sequel would be much more contentious:

The failure of the dramatist Jarry, otherwise a perceptive theorist of the stage, comes from overlooking the fact that the stage is only half of the theater. The public, that important other half, he ignored, or at best regarded with the utmost contempt. 27

Many would disagree with the implication that Jarry failed to foresee the audience's reaction, that Ubu roi was a joke that fell flat. Pierre Voltz, for instance, was sure that Jarry intended to offend:

Pour la première fois, peut-être, un auteur conçoit et fait représenter une pièce qui heurte délibérément le public auquel elle s'adresse. Le parti pris de violence et de grossièreté, le fameux 'merdre' par lequel s'ouvre la pièce, qui a presque la valeur d'un manifeste et se veut en tout cas une insulte; le rythme accéléré de l'ensemble qui se veut 'anti-théâtral', l'absurdité de l'histoire, soulignée par la désinvolture évidente avec laquelle Jarry la traite, tous ces procédés visent à heurter le public et à le scandaliser. 28

The balance of modern critical opinion is with Voltz on this point, against the theory that Jarry created the first French spectacle-provocation inadvertently.

By way of a final word on the intention behind the play, it might be pointed out that Jarry's division of the public into an elite of intelligents and a philistine multitude makes it possible that Ubu roi is susceptible in some degree to all three interpretations mentioned above. That is to say, it was conceived as a practical joke on the majority of the public, but the elite were expected both to share the joke and to perceive the play's implied critique of current theatrical practice.

What is indisputable is that Ubu roi was like no other play of its time. Something of its provocative insolence might be seen in the comédie rosse; something of its brazen implausibility in certain folies-vaudevilles and comic operas; something of its literary parody and burlesque in the travesties of Crémieux, Meilhac and Halévy, Lemaître and Donnay; and many of its techniques, as we have seen, in the farce and the puppet play. Yet in Ubu roi, these elements were used and combined in a way that was unique.

To an observer in 1900, let us say, Ubu roi must have seemed like an aventure sans lendemain, standing isolated in the French theatre of its day without any immediate successors. Later, though, its influence would prove extensive, and a good proportion of the very considerable critical attention which has been paid to Jarry as a dramatist of recent years has focussed on the great precursor, and Maurice Marc LaBelle has stinted no superlative in proclaiming Ubu roi "the most seminal, revolutionary and iconoclastic play of the modern theater".<sup>29</sup>

For if in the short term Jarry had no imitators in drama except Marinetti's Le Roi Bombance (1905), many contemporary critics have seen him as the forerunner of the dramatic experiments of Apollinaire, of the Dadaist and Surrealist theatres, of Artaud, of Ghelderode, of Vian and cabaret theatre, and of the "Theatre of the Absurd".<sup>30</sup> Indeed, many of these explicitly acknowledged their debt to Jarry, in one way or another. It will be recalled, for instance, that Artaud, Vitrac and Aron named their avant-garde venture of 1927-29 the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, and Eugène Ionesco has frequently spoken of Jarry's influence on his

work.<sup>31</sup>

Some critics have argued that it is really only because of its influence that Ubu roi has any theatrical importance. Hobson has written:

The value and interest of Ubu roi would be diminished if there were no Beckett and no Ionesco. It belongs to the realm of art in which things are of more significance for what they lead to than for what they are. (...) The coarseness and crudity of Ubu roi are in themselves repellent, receiving only an accidental merit through the backward light thrown on them by subsequent and better works.<sup>32</sup>

Such a view invites the comment that Ubu roi has been staged more often and more successfully than might be expected of a work of merely extrinsic, historical interest; but in any case the main point is that time has shown that Jarry's apparently destructive drama actually contained within it the seeds of a theatrical renewal.



# Alfred Jarry: Footnotes

1. He also played the 1er Troll de Cour in the Oeuvre's revival of the play in December 1901.
2. The title at least owed a debt to Quillard's 1891 article "De l'inutilité absolue de la mise en scène exacte".
3. Wicks (31438) gave the date as 20 December 1896. This was incorrect.
4. Léda, written in collaboration with "Karl Rosenval" (Mme Berthe Danville), was presented on 15 May 1900, apparently at the Concert des Folies-Parisiennes. The work does not appear in Wicks. Le Manoir enchanté was given a private performance on 10 January 1905 in a hall in the rue Murillo, under the title Le Manoir de Cagliostro.
5. Gémier said that he had been invited to direct the play, in an interview with Roger Valbelle published in Excelsior on 4 November 1921, according to Thieri Foulc in "Trois textes peu connus relatifs à Ubu", but a footnote to Béhar's "Jarry joué" (published in the same number of Europe) gave 5 November as the date (157, Note 2).
6. "A Symbolist Farce", in Symons, Collected Works, 9, 237.
7. In the interview with Valbelle cited by Foulc.
8. See Morienval, De Pathelin à Ubu. Ubu has also appealed to artists such as Picasso and Max Ernst.
9. Yeats, Autobiographies, 348-49.
10. Jarry to Lugné-Poe, 8 January 1896.
11. Seipel, 28.
12. Robichez, 359. Pascal Pia made a merit of the fact that Jarry did not write the play: "Le coup de maître, ç'a été de porter Ubu à la scène tel que les potaches l'avaient conçu, sans lui infliger le moindre traitement esthétique, sans s'évertuer à le dégrossir." (Pia, 564-65).
13. Serreau, 16.
14. Bedner, 70 and 72.
15. Symons, Plays, Acting and Music, 9.
16. Bedner, 72.
17. Seipel, 26.
18. One is a little surprized by Hobson's comment on the

idiom of Ubu roi: "Contrary to the general impression, it shies at using the word merdre." (Hobson, 2).

19. Symons, Collected Works, 9, 239.
20. Ibid., 238.
21. Cooper, 50.
22. Lebois, 91-92.
23. Paul Jacopin, "L'Originalité du langage théâtral dans Ubu roi", D.E.S., 1966-67.
24. See, for example, Mallarmé's article "Hérésie artistique: l'Art pour tous" (1862), which Guy Michaud has called "la clef de son oeuvre"; and W.B. Yeats, writing to Lady Gregory on "A People's Theatre": "I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many."
25. Unpublished in Jarry's lifetime, this text and the "Questions de théâtre" constitute the clearest manifesto of Jarry's theatrical ideas.
26. Grossvogel, 21.
27. Ibid., 24.
28. Voltz, 165.
29. LaBelle, 43.
30. See, for example: Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968; Grimm; Grossman, "Alfred Jarry and the Theater of the Absurd"; LaBelle; Pronko, Avant-Garde; Seipel; Serreau; etc. On the other hand, J.L. Styan has doubted that Beckett, for one, can have been influenced by "the nonsense drama of Alfred Jarry", because "It is difficult to believe that this shapeless material proved much of a guide to a meticulous artist like Beckett." (The Dark Comedy, 217, Note 1).
31. For instance in Claude Bonnefoy, Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco, Paris, Belfond, 1966, and Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, Paris, Gallimard, 1962.
32. Hobson, 1 and 2.

EDMOND ROSTAND (1868-1918)

Mon fils, mon bien-aimé, lorsque tu  
seras homme,  
Quand tu liras ces vers, où, tremblant,  
je te nomme,  
Souviens-toi que ta vie eut un rose  
matin,  
Une aube claire...

These fond words were published in 1876 in a book of verse by Eugène Rostand,<sup>1</sup> a distinguished economist and occasional poet, and they were addressed to his young son "Eddy". In truth, from his birth in Marseilles on 1 April 1868, Edmond Rostand seemed blessed with every good fortune, not the least of them being a father whose affection is so touchingly obvious and whose worldly success and prosperity left room for a love of letters. Moreover, as Ashton so picturesquely expressed it,

The gift of poetry was not the only fairy-gift he received from his father. He inherited also a handsome face, distinguished manners, and riches to render unnecessary any struggle for life.<sup>2</sup>

At the age of only nineteen, Rostand won a prize from the Académie de Marseille for an essay entitled Deux romanciers de Provence, on Honoré d'Urfé and Emile Zola. It was around the same age that he began to show an interest in writing for the stage. Emile Ripert's life of Rostand cites four dramatic texts drafted or begun and abandoned at about this time: Les Petites manies, a prose comedy of manners; Le Rêve, a verse play which in some respects anticipated La Princesse lointaine; a stage adaptation of the then-popular novel Madame d'Epone; and a one-act verse play set in the seventeenth century, Alceste. The first of his plays to be produced, though, was Le Gant rouge, a vaudeville written

with Henry Lee and staged at the Théâtre Cluny in 1888 without particular success.

In 1890, he published a book of poetry, Les Musardises, which also attracted little attention.<sup>3</sup> This, too, was the year of his marriage to the beautiful Rosemonde Gérard, whose own volume of poems, Les Pipeaux, had been published the previous year, a match saluted by Ripert rhapsodically:

Admirable destin de ce jeune poète qui chante  
en même temps que celle qu'il aime, et qui  
l'aime; c'est une chose inédite dans la  
littérature française.<sup>4</sup>

Through Rosemonde, Edmond had met the famous actor Maurice de Féraudy, who induced him to submit his verse comedy Les Deux Pierrots to the Comédie-Française. For once, though, Rostand's luck deserted him, and the comité de lecture rejected the play.

According to his wife's account, Rostand's reaction was: "Puisqu'on m'a refusé un acte, j'en lirai trois." The three acts in question were those of the verse comedy Les Romanesques, accepted by the Comédie-Française in 1893 and produced the following year with great success.

Rostand took his next play, La Princesse lointaine, to Sarah Bernhardt, who mounted it sumptuously at the Théâtre de la Renaissance in April 1895. Bernhardt scored a personal success as Melissinde, but the play disappointed a public which was probably expecting something more in the vein of Les Romanesques.

It was again Sarah who staged Rostand's next play, La Samaritaine, in 1897. This évangile en trois tableaux was once more very beautifully produced by the actress, who herself played the Samaritan courtesan Photine. The play had a mixed reception, some of the public and critics being uncom-

fortable with some of the speeches Rostand had given to Jesus in the play.

However, his next play, produced that very year, was an unparalleled triumph: the five-act heroic comedy Cyrano de Bergerac. Overnight, Rostand was recognized as France's leading dramatist, awarded the légion d'honneur out of hand, and adulated by the public.

Its success was such that it seemed certain that Rostand's next play must of necessity come as an anti-climax. Yet, remarkably, something of the same ecstatic enthusiasm greeted L'Aiglon, a drama in six acts, staged in 1900. Rostand's pathetic story of Napoleon's son capitalized on the resurgence of interest in the Napoleonic legend, and, once again, on French national pride, perhaps particularly acute in the year of the Exhibition.

Setting the seal on his success, in 1901 Rostand became the youngest candidate ever elected to the Académie Française. His inauguration address was a brilliant performance, long remembered.

Rostand's next play was not staged until 1910. It was a verse play in four acts entitled Chantecler. The long delay since L'Aiglon piqued public curiosity, and the first night was a theatrical event; but the work was not a success. Though the playwright's admirers defend the play as the most mature expression of his ideas, the fable was disconcerting, the form over-ambitious and fraught with problems of staging.

It was to be the last new play by Rostand produced in his lifetime, though La Dernière nuit de Don Juan was staged posthumously, in 1922. Shortly after the Armistice, on 2 December 1918, Rostand died of pneumonia resulting from the

Spanish influenza.

Rostand's first completed work for the theatre appears to have been Le Gant rouge, a four-act vaudeville written in collaboration with Henry Lee, his fiancée's half-brother. Lautier and Keller maintained that the play was never produced:

Destinée au théâtre de Cluny, vaudeville à la manière de Bisson et de quelques retentissants succès de Sardou, Edmond Rostand en vint à bout en quatre soirées. Les auteurs, leur oeuvre achevée, la confièrent à un tiroir et n'en parlèrent plus jamais.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps it had been better so, but the fact is that it was duly staged at the Théâtre Cluny on 24 August 1888,<sup>6</sup> and ran for fifteen performances. The authors never published Le Gant rouge,<sup>7</sup> but it is evident from the reviewers' accounts that it was a sort of duplex talisman farce, a feeble descendant of Un chapeau de paille d'Italie, in which the hectic chase after the glove of the title was intersected by the urgent pursuit of a mediocre portrait bust.

If the play did aspire to imitate the vaudevilles of Labiche, Bisson or Sardou, it fell some way short of them in métier. As far as one can judge at second-hand, it was a fairly ill-made piece. The anonymous reviewer in the Revue d'Art Dramatique found the exposition unsatisfactory in that instead of leading smoothly into the main action, the first act (set in the Musée Grévin) seemed structurally detached and incidental.<sup>8</sup> The motivation and the marshalling of the characters appear to have been awkwardly managed, too.

Some critics complained that lack of finesse made certain risqué situations in the play distastefully coarse. Commenting on this flaw, Jules Haraszti observed:

Feydeau, Bisson, etc., ont osé, depuis, des

hardiesses bien pires, mais les deux auteurs du Gant rouge ne possèdent pas l'art français de savoir tout dire et de faire passer les gravelures les plus indécentes.<sup>9</sup>

Sarcey, in Le Temps, was among those who reproved this weakness; but his most damning criticism was that the vaudeville simply was not funny:

Ce qui distingue d'une façon toute particulière la pièce de MM. Lee et Rostand, c'est qu'il ne s'y rencontre point un seul mot spirituel. Pas un trait en quatre actes, cela est fort rare et tout à fait remarquable.

In the light of his later work, it seems astonishing that Rostand should have begun his dramatic career with a play that was clumsy, heavy-handed, indelicate and devoid of humour. Haraszti's comment seems entirely appropriate: "Jamais auteur n'a commencé sa carrière d'une manière aussi contraire à sa véritable individualité."<sup>10</sup>

Rostand himself evidently was not proud of this youthful aberration. Le Gant rouge was neither published nor revived, and we note that Rosemonde Gérard discreetly ignored it in her book on her husband's work. The critic for the Revue d'Art Dramatique found one kind thing to say about the play, however. Though bemused by the wildness of the plot, he conceded: "Elle indique du moins une amusante fantaisie".<sup>11</sup>

It was extremely inopportune that Les Deux Pierrots should have come before the Reading Committee of the Comédie-Française just after the death of Théodore de Banville in 1891, for it was a light and charming one-act fantasy very much in the style Banville had made his own with Le Baiser.<sup>12</sup>

Although the play was not accepted for production, it is worth at least a cursory glance, both for what it reveals of Rostand's debt to Banville and for its early intimations of ideas and techniques which occurred in his later work.

In its technique, Les Deux Pierrots was so close to Banville that it reads less like an imitation than like Banville himself, on one of his better days. Its couplets are every whit as easy and airy and as richly rhymed. Rostand shows himself fully in possession of the characteristically Banvillesque comic rhyme, composite and millionnaire:

- Colombine - Me voir dès le matin sera de ton goût,  
dis!
- Pierrot II - Il ne faut jamais voir la femme en  
bigoudis.
- Colombine - Quand tu feras des vers...
- Pierrot II - Tu feras du tapage.
- Colombine - Non, je me pencherai câline sur ta  
page (v).

Here again are Banville's unpredictable "nonce-rhymes":

- Pierrot I - Et jusques à douze ans j'eus pour seule  
hygiène  
Des coups de pied à la hauteur  
coccygienne, (iv)

in some of which recondite words both pose and resolve the rhymers' problem:

- Pierrot II - Ce vieux coeur plus errant qu'Isaac  
Lacquem,  
Comment le sûtes-vous fixer?

Maître d'hôtel (versant) - Château Yquem (iv).

Sometimes Rostand "cheats" divertingly by using proper names, as here, or else foreign languages:

- Pierrot II - Encore, si j'avais pu m'éprendre d'une  
laide,  
D'une vieille sentant le confessionnal!  
Mais j'aime une beauté!
- Pierrot I - Une professional  
Beauty!, (iv)

or both:

- Pierrot II - L'âge vient, l'arthritisme, et le  
tempus edax,  
Et l'on va se baigner dans la boue, à



Dax (iv).

It is obvious that Rostand had learned all Banville had to teach him about rhyme. Other features of the Banville manner are not wanting, either. There are occasional echoes of his vocabulary:

L'un a le coeur pourpré... . (i)

Rostand imitates Banville's fondness for literary allusion, as in

Colombine - Qui te rend si hardi de troubler mon  
veuvage? (ii)<sup>13</sup>

where the provenance is pointed up for the audience's benefit by the reply:

Pierrot I (faisant l'agneau) - Tes yeux, loup blanc!

The play offers several examples of anachronism and incongruity à la Banville, when the fantasy world of Pierrot, Colombine and Cassandre, out of all time and place, is suddenly confronted with the local and the topical. Colombine's supper is lit by electricity, for instance (scene iv), she smokes a cigarette (scene vi), and there are passing references to the actor Le Bargy and to the Combe diet regime. Very much in the Banville tradition, too, is Colombine's final speech, addressed to the ladies of the audience. Pierrot also addresses the audience directly in his curriculum vitae in scene iv, an obsolescent artifice retained by Banville, as in Pierrot's final speech in Le Baiser.

However, the play also contains features which were to become characteristic traits of Rostand's own manner. In this trifle he already surpasses Banville - at least, Banville the dramatist - in the variety of the vocabulary he employs and in his metrical inventiveness. Les Deux Pierrots shows early examples of his abiding fondness for vivacious

stichomythia, as is seen in the following passage from scene iv (which concludes, incidentally, with quite the most impudent rhyme of them all):

Pierrot II - Est-ce moi?

Colombine (coquette) - Ça dépend!

Pierrot I - Est ce moi?

Colombine (coquette) -Ça dépend!

Pierrot II (voyant la lune paraître au-dessus des pins)

- La lune!

Pierrot I (levant une coupe vers la lune)

- A ta santé!

Maître d'hôtel - Moët et Chandon.

Le Bouchon de champagne - Pan!

One of Rostand's most typical rhythms is already discernible here.

Similarly, a number of speeches in Les Deux Pierrots, and especially Pierrot I's speech about laughter in scene ii, have in them the beginnings of the characteristic rhymed catalogue, which will one day develop into Straforel's delightful schedule of abductions and Cyrano's legendary tirade du Nez.

Jules Haraszti pointed out that the extended metaphor in scene iii, of nature as a stage with Love for prompter, anticipates Percinet's speech in Act III, scene iv of Les Romanesques comparing himself and Sylvette to puppets, with Shakespeare as prompter this time, and Love supplying the words.<sup>14</sup>

The same critic acutely perceived, too, that Colombine's repetition, in scene vi, of "Vous savez donc pleurer" with four different inflexions is precisely the same figure which

would be used in Roxane's "Comme vous la lisez!" in Act V, scene v of Cyrano de Bergerac.<sup>15</sup>

Besides the prototypes of effects and technical devices, Les Deux Pierrots often prefigures the thought of the later plays. The resolute affirmation of life and resilient optimism which would re-appear in *Cyrano* and *Chantecler* are the very substance of Pierrot I (who, objectively, has had a harder life than the melancholy Pierrot II). The play revels in the good things of the material world, from the beauties of nature to the pleasures of the table. The playwright's gallant depiction of women, as coquettish yet chaste, powerful by their beauty but compassionate, can be seen in *Columbine*.

Les Deux Pierrots is of interest, then, in relation to Rostand's development as a playwright; but it is by no means devoid of its own intrinsic appeal, despite its rejection by the Comédie-Française. Its humour, lightness of touch and the rather imposing facility with which it is handled make it the equal of many contemporary plays which were granted the honours of the stage.

Les Romanesques, a three-act comedy in verse, was first performed at the Comédie-Française on 21 May 1894. Accompanying it were an unremarkable verse comedy in one act by Louis Marsollevau, Le Bandeau de Psyché and another one-act verse play by the Belgian Symbolist Rodenbach, entitled Le Voile, described - fairly - by Emile Ripert as "distingué et fort ennuyeux."<sup>16</sup> There is no doubt that Rostand's play was the success of the evening. The audience were entranced, the reviews were excellent, and the Académie Française awarded it the Toirac Prize.

Rostand himself spelled out what he meant the play to be

and to do in the rondel-epilogue with which the characters take their leave of the audience:

Des costumes clairs, des rimes légères,  
L'Amour, dans un parc, jouant du flûteau.

Un repos naïf des pièces amères,  
Un peu de musique, un peu de Watteau,  
Un spectacle honnête et qui finit tôt...

Even making allowance for the modesty donned on such occasions, the avowed intent was unassuming: a light, pretty, artificial entertainment. This is just what the play has been for most people, and it seems churlish in some critics to complain that it was not something more. Conversely, certain admirers of Rostand have probably been ill-advised in claiming that it was something more. Perhaps Henry James struck the right balance when he wrote

If the whole thing is the frankest of fantasies, an excursion into the pays bleu, it is the work of a man already conscious of all the values involved.<sup>17</sup>

Most of Rostand's plays were concerned, to a greater or lesser extent, with the contrast between illusion and reality. This idea was most conspicuous in Les Romanesques, La Princesse lointaine and L'Aiglon, where it was placed in the foreground, so to speak; but it also arose, in various guises, in Cyrano de Bergerac, Chantecler, and perhaps even in Les Deux Pierrots. It was one of the author's chief themes. In Les Romanesques, naturally, it was treated lightly and humorously rather than earnestly and pathetically, as it was in the following play, La Princesse lointaine, or in L'Aiglon.

Though the theme was the same, some people have felt that what Rostand had to say about the real and the ideal in this play in some way contradicted what he said in the others.

As Edward Everett Hale wrote in Dramatists of Today (p.17):

Les Romanesques is not what might be expected of the author of Cyrano de Bergerac. Not because it is slight, nor because it is little more than attractive, but because it is a delicate satire upon the tribe of romancers in general.<sup>18</sup>

The contradiction is only an apparent one, however, if it is accepted that the comedy is a critique of spurious romance only, of the kind of postiche poetry which Cathos and Magdelon (or Emma Bovary) had vainly tried to impose upon life. Rostand's contention was that there was a real romance, too, that poetry was not dependent on the falsification of life because reality had its own poetry if looked at aright. This idea might seem uncomfortably close to Augier's Gabrielle, but it is interesting to note that it was one Rostand shared with his friend Renard, although their aesthetic principles might appear to be contraries.

It was not, then, that romance was defeated in Les Romanesques, as has sometimes been suggested. In Act III, scene iv, Percinet managed to persuade Sylvette that the charm of their adventure did not depend upon its romanesque trappings, since what was authentic in it - love, youth, spring and the beauty of nature - was glamour and romance enough. So far from striking their colours, Percinet and Sylvette simply nailed them to something more substantial.

It is true that such an interpretation differs from that proposed by J.W. Grieve in L'Oeuvre dramatique d'Edmond Rostand. He saw the play's outcome as youth and idealism bested and forced to terms by prosy pragmatism, represented by Bergamin and Pasquinot. Three points in this view appear contentious. First, of course, that Act III scene iv really did signify the lovers' capitulation to the humdrum life on

its own terms, already questioned above. Second, that it was idealism itself and not some tawdry simulacrum which they gave up. Third, that the fathers were the agents of crass materialism and as such natural adversaries of the young people's idealism.

It might be argued that in accepting the last proposition, Grieve was taking things at the children's valuation, quite understandably because he considered they spoke for Rostand: "Car ces jeunes Romanesques ne sont autres que lui-même."<sup>19</sup> At all events, he seems to have assumed with them that fathers and children must be on different sides.

Now while the prevalent comic tradition from the Greeks, via Molière, to Capus was that fathers were "blocking characters" at odds with their children's wishes, this was not the only function open to fathers in comedy, witness the benevolent fathers in Marivaux and even certain plays of Labiche. It is surely the latter whom Bergamin and Pasquinot resemble more than the Heavy Father stereotype. The play shows them to be indulgent and cooperative parents who instead of combatting their children's romantic illusions anticipate them and arrange for their fulfilment.

This raises a problem inherent in Grieve's view of their character. If Bergamin and Pasquinot were really the polar opposites of the ardent young romantics, if they were totally prosaic and devoid of dreams themselves, how could they put themselves so successfully in their children's place? How could an "esprit terre à terre, banal et solide"<sup>20</sup> have foreseen:

Que s'aimer en secret et d'un amour coupable  
Leur plairait, (I, iv)

much less extemporize the wildly romantic scheme of the abduc-

tion?

The simplest hypothesis is that they knew what would work for a pair of fanciful romantics because there was at least a touch of the romantic in themselves. It is not being paradoxical to put the question: Who are the romanesques in Les Romanesques?

If once the notion is entertained, various aspects of their behaviour seem to support it. Blinkered by stage convention, perhaps, Grieve's view of the fathers seems unduly selective, only recognizing the hard-headed bourgeois in them:

Bergamin - Quel était notre but, le seul?

Pasquinot - Oter ce mur...

Bergamin - Pour vivre ensemble...

Pasquinot - Et fondre en une nos deux terres!

Bergamin - Calcul de vieux amis...

Pasquinot - Et de propriétaires! (I, iv)

Against this, however, due weight should also be given to what their own daydreams of Act I scene vi revealed about their characters.

By Act II, the marriage of reason and the conjoining of their properties were imminent: the acquisitive bourgeois should have been content. Instead, they were restless and peevish. In part, it was because daily proximity had created unforeseen friction between them; but in part it was because they were bored. They missed all that the wall had once stood for in their lives. They had loved the play-acting, the stealth, the risks, the complicity of it all; in a word, they had loved the romance:

Pasquinot

-C'était très amusant!

(bâillant)                    Bergamin?

Bergamin (de même)    - Pasquinot?

Pasquinot                                    - Ça nous manque, à présent.

Bergamin                    - Non, voyons!...

(Après réflexion)                    Si, pourtant. Oh! c'est très drôle! - Est-ce que

Ce serait la revanche, ici, du  
Romanesque?... (II, i)

It could hardly be maintained that Rostand's characterizations in Les Romanesques were penetrating. Nevertheless, they were not as flat and uniform as some critics imply. The two fathers had more to them than the small-minded materialists of convention, and we note that they were differentiated from one another: Bergamin was the more sentimental and imaginative, Pasquinot the more formalistic and canny.

This was not a play, like Cyrano or Chantecler, structured around a single central role. The fathers were almost as important and as interesting in themselves as the young lovers; and Straforel, whose role was the smallest (after Blaise the gardener) has proved for many the most vivid and memorable character in the comedy. As everyone agrees, the resourceful Straforel was clearly the first draft of that preeminent man of parts, Cyrano, just as his admirable catalogue of kidnappings was the bravura piece in this play corresponding to the tirade du Nez. Like Cyrano, Straforel had a larger-than-life quality which set him apart from the other characters, as indeed befitted a spadassin in a mundane modern world preoccupied with its waistcoat buttons and watering-cans.

Straforel's extravagant behaviour and language generate a good share of the play's humour. Some stems from simple



but true insights into human conduct, especially perhaps our vanity and inconsistency. Much of it, of course, was produced by Rostand's verbal brilliance. This has also been the most criticized aspect of the play, however, the commonest complaint being that the word-play is sometimes laboured, excessive and precious. On this, the loyalist Grieve agreed with the hostile Lalou. Taken all in all and for what it was, however, the play was amusing and charming. Quite the nicest and probably most sincere tribute to the play was recorded in Jules Renard's Journal (19 March 1900):

- Un jour, dit Antoine, j'ai entendu le premier acte des Romanesques. J'ai trouvé ça tellement bien que je suis parti, de peur d'aimer les deux autres.

The role of Frère Trophime in La Princesse lointaine, produced in 1895, was played by the actor Jean Coquelin. He had attended the first reading of the play in the company of his father, Constant Coquelin, known as Coquelin aîné, one of the leading French actors of the day. He had been so impressed by Rostand's text that he offered to act any role that the young playwright might write for him. Such an opportunity was not to be missed, and the play Rostand created for him was Cyrano de Bergerac.

Coquelin had taken over the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, and plans were made to mount the production for the Christmas holidays of 1897. There followed a very trying time for Rostand. Rehearsals were fraught with problems; Coquelin's partner, Hertz, had so little faith in the play that Rostand had to meet much of the production costs himself;<sup>21</sup> and worst of all, his pessimism was shared by most of the cast and by the playwright himself. It is said that on the night of the générale he tearfully begged Coquelin's

pardon for involving him in such a disaster.<sup>22</sup>

On 27 December 1897, Cyrano de Bergerac achieved what was probably the most resounding triumph in the history of the French stage. Constantly interrupted by enthusiastic applause, the performance ended around two o'clock in the morning with an estimated forty curtain calls for the radiant cast and the astounded author. The back-stage area was invaded by rhapsodic critics and by ecstatic friends such as Sarah Bernhardt, who had been kept advised by her son Maurice of the play's reception act by act, as she galloped through Les Mauvais bergers at the Renaissance in order to catch the end of Rostand's play. All reports concur that it was an exceptionally joyous occasion, one of those nights in the theatre when the audience is reluctant to break up and go home.

Cyrano de Bergerac was classified by its author as a comédie héroïque. Other plays so described have been excluded from this study as being more héroïque than comédie; but Cyrano has been retained because it was genuinely comic. G.K. Chesterton's piece on Rostand in Varied Types was largely devoted to arguing this point:

Monsieur Rostand showed even more than his usual insight when he called Cyrano de Bergerac a comedy, despite the fact that, strictly speaking, it ends with disappointment and death. The essence of tragedy is a spiritual breakdown or decline, and in the great French play the spiritual sentiment mounts unceasingly until the last line. It is not the facts themselves, but our feeling about them, that makes tragedy and comedy...<sup>23</sup>

Chesterton took the optimistic view that in the play "the spiritual sentiment mounts unceasingly" because he understood the work to be a celebration of the indomitable human spirit. On the other hand, the implacable René Lalou

saw the play as a drame, superior to Rostand's other work precisely because its hero perfectly embodied the playwright's own unhappy situation as a second-rater vainly yearning for true greatness.<sup>24</sup> This pessimistic reading of the play as Cyrano's total and unconsolated defeat was a kind of transposition into a minor key of what has been probably the usual understanding of Cyrano's significance:

Cyrano is in fact a type - a type of the largest class of people in the world (for it includes every one), namely those who do not get what they deserve, who find no chance to do what they know they could do, who are so much greater to themselves than to the cold world. (...)

And so Cyrano takes our sympathy. We are even as he. With him it is a nose, with us fortunately a something else, that prevents our standing forth to the world for all we are worth.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, not everyone has felt in sympathy with Cyrano in fact. There have been those who have positively disliked him, a major setback for what is, after all, a one-man show. One such critic was Sir Harold Hobson, who protested:

When Cyrano browbeats the actor Montfleury in the opening scene and ruins the performance that a large audience has gathered to see, he is behaving no more attractively than the football hooligans who break up railway carriages, and Rostand's view of him as a romantic hero becomes, at its best, unacceptably naïve. Rostand does not any longer convince us that this swashbuckling show-off is a figure worthy of admiration, and his dazzlingly cascading verse fails to wash away our objections. The play is one of the nineteenth century's brilliant mistakes.<sup>26</sup>

Hobson manages to insinuate here that in our more enlightened times we have seen through Cyrano in a way the nineteenth century could not. Yet in 1898, William Archer had foreseen all Hobson's objections, had expounded them himself with entertaining verve, and had answered them - at least, insofar as they can ever be answered, for as he recognized, what is really involved here is the critic's own

temperament:

Such critics are not merely the Puritans but the Quakers of the aesthetic world. They insist that the yea of art shall be yea, and its nay, nay, to the end of the chapter.<sup>27</sup>

Archer slyly instanced Falstaff as a socially irresponsible reprobate similar to Cyrano; but a fairer and a truer analogy might be the hero of the classic Western, whose usual values are much the same (simplistic moral code, high-handed individualism, summary justice, etc) and equally intolerable in a real-life neighbour. Yet audiences conditioned to a high degree of social conformity seem quite prepared to accept such a hero in the context of an escapist romance of bygone days; which is basically what Cyrano de Bergerac was.

What, in fact, did audiences see in Cyrano de Bergerac in 1897? The unprecedented scale of its success makes it a phenomenon requiring examination. Some, no doubt, would explain it simply as the recognition due to a masterpiece; but from the very beginning some critics have insisted that the grounds for the play's extraordinary appeal were at least in part extrinsic, lying not in its inherent merits as drama but in the circumstance that it was staged at the exactly propitious moment before a public in an ideally receptive frame of mind.<sup>28</sup>

Without prejudice to the question of any intrinsic qualities Rostand's play might have, let us consider this view. Its proponents suggest that the factors predisposing the public to welcome Cyrano - or rather, a play such as Cyrano - were partly socio-political and partly theatrical in character. As to the first, it has been argued that the France of 1897, still bearing the spiritual scars of the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune and now convulsed by the

Dreyfus Affair, was badly in need of a fillip to its national confidence and self-esteem and found this in Rostand's heroic comedy. It is certainly very striking how many of the reviewers who greeted it with such enthusiasm presented it first and foremost as a specifically French achievement and a source of pride for Frenchmen. *Cyrano* and Rostand seemed to affirm some of the most cherished traits to which the national self-image laid claim: courage, military bravura, gaiety, irony, sensibility, elegance, wit, and clarity of thought and speech.

The play's patriotism was particularly congenial to the political right, who opportunistically made partisan capital of it. Describing Rostand's play as "Une fanfare de pantalons rouges", the journalist Georges Thiébaud interpreted it as the harbinger of a nationalist resurgence; and La Libre parole predictably managed to see its success as a great victory over "le clan d'Israël".

In a more specifically theatrical sense, too, Cyrano de Bergerac benefited from a mood of patriotic pride tinged with xenophobia. Audiences felt the same frustrated nationalism as playgoers that they did as citizens. They had grown tired of the sort of drama offered by the avant-garde theatres - Ibsen, Hauptmann, Tolstoi, Stringberg, Björnson - because it was cheerless and foreign. In fact, it seems to have been generally felt that it was cheerless because it was foreign, and there was widespread nostalgia for a drama which would once again have the wit, gaiety, charm and clarity held to be characteristically French.<sup>29</sup>

It is clear that the success of Cyrano de Bergerac was enhanced by a reaction, on the part of a "silent majority",

against the avant-garde repertory, both foreign and French, perceived as

Tant d'études psychologiques, tant d'historiettes d'adultères parisiens, tant de pièces féministes, socialistes, scandinaves...<sup>30</sup>

As early as 5 March 1890, Antoine had recorded the voice of Albert Wolff crying in the wilderness:

Son Courrier de Paris est dédié à 'un jeune homme' auquel il dit:

'Tu sais que nous t'attendons et quand tu viendras nous te ferons un succès tel que le carnaval dramatique dont nous souffrons depuis quelque temps prendra fin aussitôt.' Et après trois colonnes où il déploie sa verve contre nous, il ajoute: 'Ce jeune homme qui nous débar-rassera de tout cela ne peut pas être loin. Nous le porterons en triomphe'.<sup>31</sup>

It must have seemed that with Cyrano de Bergerac the prophecy was accomplished.

The leaders of the theatrical avant-garde themselves regarded the triumph of Rostand's play as a rejection by the public of all they had stood for. Antoine graphically caught the moment in his Souvenirs sur le Théâtre-Antoine:

28 décembre 1897. Comme j'étais ce soir, après le rideau tombé, dans ma loge à me démaquiller, mon camarade Dumény ouvre brusquement la porte et avec une exaltation que je verrai sur le visage de tous les gens qui vont survenir, il me dit le succès foudroyant, prodigieux, qui vient de se déclarer à Cyrano de Bergerac, la pièce d'Edmond Rostand, dont c'était la première ce soir (...).

Je perçois tout de suite l'espèce de catastrophe pour nous que va être cette réaction du public retournant tout à coup au théâtre romanesque, et comme la pièce, à ce que l'on dit, est un chef-d'oeuvre de grâce et de pittoresque, c'est autour d'elle que va se faire la concentration de toutes les forces éparses depuis quelques années contre notre mouvement réaliste. C'est un accident tertiaire du romantisme que sentaient bien venir Richepin, Mendès, Bergerat, Banville, d'autres encore, en tentant, depuis un quart de siècle la grande pièce lyrique et en cherchant le vers comique, sans réaliser le miracle que vient d'accomplir Edmond Rostand.<sup>32</sup>

At the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Lugné-Poe's despondency was

the same. In his column in La Presse on 3 January 1898, he congratulated Rostand on his achievement, albeit rather wanly; but in a later article, on 28 March, he was at pains to play down the idea that the triumph of Cyrano de Bergerac necessarily implied a rejection of Ibsen's theatre. There can be little doubt, though, that it was widely interpreted in this way.

There is every reason to accept, then, that the specific conditions which obtained in France at the time greatly contributed to the triumph of Cyrano de Bergerac in 1897; but there can be no question of ascribing its success solely to its timeliness or to its flattering the chauvinism of a particular public. The play benefitted from such factors but was not dependent upon them, as Bornier's La Fille de Roland had been in 1875, for instance. It is still revived with success to this day, and from the beginning it has enjoyed great success outside France.<sup>33</sup>

So though due allowance should be made for the propitious circumstances of its creation, we must look to the play itself for the chief reasons of its success. Mention has already been made of the hero's character and significance, so aspects of form will be considered here.

Hobson, who disliked Cyrano himself and much else in the play besides, was favourably impressed by the writing:

The verse has a splendid verve, and Rostand adapts it to the swift interchange of conversation as cleverly as he uses it in glittering outbursts of rhetoric.<sup>34</sup>

By fragmentation of the alexandrine and a skilful variation of coupes, Rostand made the verse yield new effects, yet in the tirades he surpassed Banville himself in brilliance and abundance.<sup>35</sup>

Rostand's dramatic verse reached its plenitude in Cyrano de Bergerac, and perhaps in L'Aiglon. By the time he wrote Chantecler his expression had become somewhat mannered and over-elaborate, possibly more suited to reading than to performance. In Cyrano he was already in full possession of his medium and for the most part maintained a balance between poetic form and dramatic function which was to draw praise from T.S. Eliot:

Not only as a dramatist, but as a poet, he is superior to Maeterlinck, whose drama, failing to be dramatic, fails also to be poetic. Maeterlinck has a literary perception of the dramatic and a literary perception of the poetic, and he joins the two; the two are not, as sometimes they are in the work of Rostand, fused.<sup>36</sup>

Admirable as Rostand's dramatic verse may have been, it was evidently not an indispensable factor in Cyrano's success with the public, for as Barrett H. Clark argued, somewhat bluntly: "The poetry is not of supreme importance, for the play has succeeded in many translations."<sup>37</sup> Most of the comedy's verve, fantasy and charm can survive competent translation. So can much of the humour, though certain things are lost: some word play (most notably, of course, the equivocation on the word panache) and some tricks of rhyme in the Banville manner. Rostand did not rely on such things alone for his comedy, however. Many comic lines did not depend on his pyrotechnic use of French, such as Cyrano's embarrassed confession to Christian in Act IV scene vii:

Tu lui

As écrit plus souvent que tu ne crois,

which was as plain-spoken as Becque, or his wry aside when de Guiche gloatingly announced that Christian's wedding-night must be postponed:

Dire qu'il croit me faire énormément de  
peine!, (III, xii)



which might have been Labiche. There were amusing character sketches, such as the delightful Ragueneau. Comic situations abounded, like Christian trying to provoke Cyrano (II, ix) or to do his own wooing (III, v). There were innumerable miscellaneous jokes in passing, like the irony of the bourgeois playgoer's lines on the Academicians in Act I scene ii:

Voici Boudu, Boissat, et Cureau de la Chambre,  
Porchères, Colomby, Bourzeys, Bourdon, Arbaud...  
Tous ces noms dont pas un ne mourra, que c'est  
beau!

Citation can give no adequate account of the humour of Rostand's comedy, however, because its primary quality was precisely that it was so varied and abundant.

There is much to be said for William Archer's judgement that

The master qualities of Cyrano de Bergerac are two: its inexhaustible, scintillating wit, and the fertility of dramatic invention displayed, not so much in the general scheme, as in details of scenic effects, and in the artful interplay of dialogue and 'business'.<sup>38</sup>

A general progression can be seen in the theatricality of Rostand's works, particularly with respect to their visual qualities. In Les Deux Pierrots, he had given some thought to the play's visual effect, assuredly, but largely with an eye to its decorative possibilities. To do him justice, with the white costumes and golden Chinese lanterns against the nocturnal blue ground he managed to compose some pretty pictures, in a style best described perhaps as "By Willette after Watteau".

The decorative would always remain a major consideration in his work - the picturesque settings for each act of Cyrano were skilfully chosen; but in Les Romanesques he already showed himself more interested in the theatrical resources

afforded by gesture, attitude, movement and positioning, and in sight-jokes and visual surprises. He devised a little jeu de scène for Straforel's introduction to Pasquinot (I,v), for instance, and first revealed the fathers' secret friendship (I, iv) and the stonemason's identity (III, ii) by visual signs. Similarly, the physical appearance of Bergamin and Pasquinot in Act II scene vii and that of Percinet in Act III scene iv told their own stories before any words of explanation were offered.

Cyrano de Bergerac showed the playwright's developing gift for writing for the eye as well as for the ear, with effects ranging from Cyrano's surprize entrance in the first act to the spectacular battle scene which concluded the fourth.

According to Coquelin, Rostand was responsible for much of the mise en scène of Cyrano de Bergerac himself, and showed remarkable flair for the work. His style of direction was marked by a clear preconception of the total impression he wanted to achieve, a ready imagination for devising telling scenic effects, and a meticulous eye for detail. This is easily credited because there is ample evidence of the same traits in the printed text. It is enough to glance at a few sample pages chosen at random to see from the wealth of detailed stage-directions how concretely the comedy was conceived for theatrical performance.

A special merit in Cyrano de Bergerac which Rostand had had no occasion to display in the other comedies studied, was his particular skill in marshalling large numbers of players. Rostand does not seem to have received due recognition for his crowd scenes. He handled them well, with an impressive capacity for keeping track of large numbers of characters

simultaneously in his imagination. It is interesting to note that he wrote for crowds rather as realists like Chronegk and Antoine directed them, in the respect that he individualized their members, instead of wielding them in undifferentiated blocks of supers, according to the tradition at the Opéra and most commerical theatres. The audience at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in the first act of Cyrano was an outstanding example of this. Virtually everyone had a precise social identity, be it bourgeois, musketeer or pickpocket, and was provided with his own stage business and lines by the playwright, who combined and orchestrated the individual contributions into a remarkably vivid and interesting whole.

Here again, Rostand gave proof of that prodigal abundance which was one of the most striking qualities of his work in general. He gave the impression that his fertile imagination was never at a loss for a word, a rhyme, a joke or a piece of by-play. By the time he wrote Cyrano, Rostand had developed his stagecraft and his powers of scenic invention to complement his facility with words. Cyrano de Bergerac may well have had a special significance for a French audience of 1897, but its survival<sup>39</sup> - even in prose and even in a foreign language - seems to attest that Rostand's myth was well chosen and his dramatic technique sound.

It is perfectly apparent to us today that Cyrano de Bergerac was not, as Faguet and Sarcey hoped and as Antoine and Lugné-Poe feared, the start of a new era in French drama. Assuredly, 27 December 1897 was a significant date in theatrical history; but Rostand's work was not the beginning but the end of something: the brief St. Martin's summer of the romantic drama.<sup>40</sup>

For all the huge success of Cyrano de Bergerac, Rostand

had no real successors or influence. Perhaps his example may have given some encouragement to the revival of interest in historical drama around 1900<sup>41</sup>; it is even possible that his work did something to extend a little the declining life of the verse play in France.<sup>42</sup> He had no direct imitators of any importance: the few pretenders, such as Zamacoïs, were of little significance in their own day and are now quite forgotten. Their disappearance has left Rostand isolated in our eyes, an anomaly and an anachronism. A faint sense of surprise always accompanies the realization that Rostand and Claudel were exact contemporaries and that Cyrano de Bergerac was staged after Ubu roi.

Rostand was essentially backward-looking, both in his techniques and in his values. His work was the culmination of a tradition, and with Cyrano de Bergerac he gave the boulevard theatre of the nineteenth century its masterpiece.

Edmond Rostand: Footnotes

1. Eugène Rostand, Les Sentiers unis.
2. H. Ashton, Introduction to Cyrano de Bergerac, Oxford, Blackwell, 1949, i.
3. Except for an enthusiastic review in the Revue Bleue (12 April 1890) by Augustin Filon, who wrote: "Voilà le début le plus éclatant qu'a vu notre littérature depuis le jour où l'adolescent Musset jeta au vent Les Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie."
4. Ripert, 45.
5. Lautier & Keller, 12.
6. Ripert stated that it was "joué en 1889" (36). This was incorrect.
7. A footnote on page 586 of Strowski's Tableau stated "En 1888, il avait publié Le Gant rouge." This appears to be incorrect.
8. "Interim", "Chronique dramatique", R.A.D., 11 (1888), 301.
9. Haraszti, 51. The author of this opinion was Hungarian, incidentally.
10. Ibid.
11. "Interim", loc. cit. He also indicated that the public, uninhibited by the scruples of the critics, found the play amusing, but speculated that much of the credit for this might be due to the excellent acting of the Cluny troupe.
12. Got, then doyen, is said to have exclaimed: "Assez de Pierrots comme ça!"
13. Cf. La Fontaine, Fables, 1, x.
14. Haraszti, 56.
15. Ibid.
16. Ripert, 51.
17. In the Cornhill Magazine, November 1901, reprinted in The Scenic Art, 310.
18. Cf. "Les idées qui s'en dégagent s'opposent surtout aux pièces heroïques, telles que Cyrano de Bergerac." (Weyl, "A propos de Cyrano de Bergerac", 404).
19. Grieve, 32.
20. Ibid, 30.
21. See Plunkett, 326.

22. Gerard, 14.
23. Chesterton, Varied Types, 78-79.
24. Lalou.
25. Hale, 28.
26. Hobson, 35.
27. Archer, 48.
28. For example: G. Larroumet, Le Temps, 29 June 1903; Lemaître, Impressions, 10, 334-35; Ernest-Charles, 383.
29. See for instance Goncourt's reactionary and xenophobe preface to A bas le progrès!
30. Lemaître, loc. cit.
31. Antoine, Souvenirs, 1, 168.
32. Antoine, Souvenirs, 2, 126.
33. Especially in the United States, where Cyrano (like "Camille", i.e. Marguerite Gautier) is probably more generally known than Phèdre or Alceste.
34. Hobson, 35.
35. According to Ernest-Charles, "Rostand seul peut être banvillesque plus que Banville lorsqu'il dit avec une animation extraordinaire que le nez de Cyrano est long." (Ernest-Charles, 37). On the other hand, Weyl (op. cit., 406) remarked: "Dans ses couplets de bravoure je cherche en vain la maëstria d'un Banville ou seulement la truculence d'un Richepin."
36. Eliot, 84. Exactly the same quality was noted by Archer when Coquelin took the play to London in 1898: "The great art of M. Rostand, it seems to me, lies in the absolute fusion of his poetry with his drama, the complete interpenetration of the two elements." (Study and Stage, 46)
37. Clark, 151.
38. Archer, op. cit., 45.
39. At the moment of writing, Cyrano de Bergerac has been performed almost 4,000 times in Paris, including 854 performances at the Comédie-Française.
40. In his book Modern Drama, Martin Lamm placed Rostand in his section on Symbolism; described him as "another writer of the same school" as Maeterlinck and Claudel; and claimed that "he had spent his apprentice years in the Symbolist school as a writer of lyric poetry." (Lamm, 170) This view is unaccountable. Rostand generally passes for a Romantic - indeed, it was on this

footing that he was so bitterly attacked by Lalou and others. Perhaps the aptest description would be "Neo-Romantic".

41. Lamm (op. cit., 143) patriotically ascribed this resurgence, including Cyrano itself, to the influence of Strindberg.
42. This was one of the lesser accusations made in Jehan Rictus' vicious pamphlet, Un 'Bluff' littéraire: le cas Edmond Rostand, (14).

SUBJECTS OF COMEDY

As compared with the comedy of the July Monarchy, or even that of the frivolous Second Empire, the comic theatre of this period was generally speaking more sceptical and critical in tone, and playwrights availed themselves of the greater freedom of comment permitted by the censor under this regime. There were limits to that freedom, of course, and besides the official censorship the dramatist had to take account of the much more interesting constraints imposed by public taste.

There were subjects which were significant by their absence from the scope of comedy, probably because they were felt to be too solemn or too delicate. Expectedly, God was entirely exempted; but also, despite a rising anti-clericalism, the church and its dignitaries were only rarely, mildly and timidly twitted until after 1900 (Ces Messieurs, 1905; La Bigote, 1909; etc.).<sup>1</sup> In the realm of politics, even an imaginary President of the Republic seems to have been taboo: presumably the office itself was felt to be sacred. Very occasionally, a royalist or a former dignitary of the Second Empire might appear in a comic context, but there were no comic ex-Communards: some scars were still too tender.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Les Chapons was enough to show that audiences in 1890 were not ready, either, to envisage the recent war in anything but its heroic aspect. A few delicate aspects of sexual conduct, such as birth-control and incest, would also appear to have been exempt from levity.

Nevertheless, the censor and the public allowed comedy



to address a surprising variety of current conduct and revered institutions. Within reasonable bounds, politics were now fair game. Deputies and even ministers could be shown as conceited, idle, incompetent, libidinous or venal and the instability of governments was a standard, indeed hackneyed joke. Particular issues and parties could be more sensitive, but avant-garde groups felt able to give restricted performances of partisan plays like Malaquin and Roussel's Anachronisme (Escholiers, 20 December 1891), a caustic personal satire on the royalist pretender and his family, or Barrès' Une journée parlementaire (Théâtre-Libre, 23 February 1894) and Brieux's L'Engrenage (Escholiers, 16 May 1894), both clearly referring to the current Panama scandal.<sup>3</sup>

The apparatus of government was ridiculed freely: prefects were eligible enough but for some reason the status of sous-prefet was agreed to be inherently funny,<sup>4</sup> like that of dentist. The judiciary, the legal system, court procedure and lawyers were a valuable comic resource for many playwrights besides Courteline,<sup>5</sup> and the police and gendarmerie were not his exclusive preserve, either.<sup>6</sup>

Mention of Courteline naturally raises the question of the army also, and it is of particular interest to see how it was treated in a period spanning the war, Boulangism and the Dreyfus affair. From shortly after the reopening of the theatres, individual soldiers continued to appear as characters of comedy, as before. Then the wave of post-war militarism which carried Boulanger and the song En revenant de la revue to popularity gave rise also to a certain enthusiasm for cheery operettas, revues militaires and the

like presenting a sympathetic image of the army. It was in the Nineties, however, that the vogue for comic plays of military life was most marked,<sup>7</sup> and many of these took a much more satirical view of the army, including its officer corps, hierarchical structure and discipline.<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps worth stressing that such plays as Courteline's Lidoire and Les Gaietés de l'Escadron<sup>9</sup> and Feydeau and Desvallières's Champignol malgré lui, which castigated the stupidity, brutality and injustice to be found in army life, were staged at a time when anti-Dreyfusards were saying in so many words that anyone who undermined blind respect for the army was a bad Frenchman and a traitor.<sup>10</sup> The public clearly disagreed.

If the uniform no longer inspired unquestioning awe, neither did civil honours. Comedy made ample fun of the national passion for decorations. At first there seems to have been an effort made to avoid bringing the Légion d'honneur into situations where its dignity might be diminished, but eventually it too was exposed to the prevailing spirit of mockery in Soullaine and Grizel's La Part du mari, Feydeau and Desvallières's Le Ruban, Bernard's Le Fardeau de la liberté and the like.

The Académie Française was still treated with a certain circumspection. Grotesque or base characters were shown rather as merely candidates for membership, like the abject Noizay in Guiches's Snob, and as late as 1912 Flers and Caillavet's L'Habit vert was regarded as bold and controversial satire.

Audiences could also laugh at problems which touched their own lives more directly. Financial fraud and mis-

management, which were serious facts of real life during these early years, were nevertheless acceptable and indeed common subjects for comedy, as Turcotte in particular has shown. It has been suggested that Gondinet and Véron's Les Affolés (Vaudeville, 8 October 1883) was too close to the mark for comfort with audiences badly shaken by the Union Générale crash of the previous year.<sup>11</sup> Yet its relatively cool reception (52 performances) did not deter Hennique and the Odéon from staging L'Argent d'autrui on 9 February 1893 (though it narrowly escaped being banned by the censor),<sup>12</sup> nor Edmond Sée from depicting another bank on the verge of collapse in La Brebis at the Oeuvre on 29 May 1896.

In fact, from Meilhac and Halévy's Tricoche et Cacolet onwards, comedy took a generally cynical view of businessmen and bankers as a class. Bank crashes, misappropriations, swindles and defaulting bankers fleeing to Belgium became increasingly frequent ingredients of comic drama towards the turn of the century, notably in the works of sardonic playwrights like Capus and Mirbeau.

A fairly broad tolerance was evident in the extent to which comedy could treat the more sensitive areas of private life also. Death itself could be joked about. Eugène Bourgeois's black comedy Le Pendu turned on suicide and murder; and even outside the special moral climate of comédie rosse there were macabre "mainstream" comedies, like Augier and Labiche's undervalued Le Prix Martin in which the principal action consisted in Martin's squeamish efforts to murder his wife's lover.

Above all, the French comic theatre of the time earned

its reputation for treating matters of sexual conduct with a freedom unparalleled elsewhere. Sexual promiscuity and adultery were represented as endemic, and involvement with cocottes was so common as to appear the norm. Sexual dysfunctions, such as inadequacy or excess of libido, were perfectly acceptable comic material for audiences at the Palais-Royal, Variétés, or Vaudeville. Homosexuality could be taken lightly, as in Donnay's Lysistrata at the Grand-Théâtre on 22 December 1892; and the comédie rosse might even presume to touch on such a delicate issue as abortion in Fèvre's L'Honneur.

It is a little disturbing to the modern sensibility that the idea of rape was evidently not thought completely incompatible with the comic spirit. Robert de Champeville's one-act comedy Presque, apparently one of the viler productions of the period, turned on the detention and threatened violation of a young widow. The reviews expressed not the slightest distaste for the play's subject or "hero".<sup>13</sup> In La Duchesse Putiphar,<sup>14</sup> a so-called farce romantique by Louis Artus, a teen-age brigand was arrested in the act of trying to force the youngest of his captives, who subsequently tried to help him escape, and comforted with her tears and kisses

Le gamin glorieux, méchant et fantaisiste,  
Le bandit de seize ans, le pauvre fou rêveur  
(II, viii)

as he was taken to what was presented as a pathetic martyrdom. The extent to which José's conduct was presumed to be extenuated by youth and imperious male sexuality is thought-provoking.<sup>15</sup>

To sum up: from what has been adduced, it will be

apparent that the bounds of what was considered acceptable comic material were extended during this period, for better or for worse. Needless to say, a great deal of comic theatre still treated the same themes and milieux as Scribe, Duvert, Barrière and Labiche had used: attention has been deliberately restricted to some of the developments in the scope of comedy which characterize this period. Political life, the image of the army, financial malpractices and, some would say,<sup>16</sup> sexual laxity were among those topics which, while not peculiar to this era in French social history, had special relevance to it. One or two other such subjects will be looked at in a little more detail below.

## Subjects of Comedy: Footnotes

1. E.g. Courteline's saynète Une messe of 1892.
2. Even in serious vein, there were almost no plays about the Commune or its aftermath, as Pierre Gobin pointed out in "La Commune: thème dramatique". Coppée's well-meant Le Pater was banned.
3. As noted in an earlier chapter, both plays had censorship problems. As far as Barrès' play was concerned, Baudin seemed to think censorship justified: "Elle a interdit la longue diffamation qu'est la Journée parlementaire." ("L'Homme politique dans le théâtre français contemporain", 282, Note 1).
4. E.g. Gandillot, Le Sous-préfet de Château-Buzard; Ordonneau, Valabrègue & Kéroul, Les Boulinard; Valabrègue, Le Sous-préfet, etc.
5. E.g. the court-room scenes in Meilhac & Halévy, La Boule; Feydeau & Desvallières, L'Affaire Edouard; etc.
6. E.g. Tristan Bernard, Le Fardeau de la liberté.
7. "La période 'militaire' du théâtre de Courteline va du 5 novembre 1890, parution de Vingt-six, au 18 février 1895, première des Gaietés de l'Escadron à l'Ambigu." (Bornecque, 566, Note 8).
8. A number of accounts of army life published in other media - fiction, journalistic pieces, cartoons - were critical (Les Sous-Offs, le Cavalier Miserey) or comic in tone. The significant difference was that people laughed at Le Train de 8h47, Jarry's anti-militarist squibs or Le Sapeur Camember in private.
9. Les Gaietés de l'Escadron had to overcome some censorship problems.
10. For one example among many, see Doumic's review of P. & V. Margueritte's Le Désastre (Etudes sur la littérature française, 3, especially 310-11).
11. "Il n'y a pas une scène des Affolés qui ne vienne à chaque instant nous rappeler cet effondrement désagréable." ("Frimousse" in Le Gaulois, 9 September 1883).
12. While O.R. Morgan connected the play's poor showing (16 performances) with the Panama scandal in his article on Hennique (N.F.S., 6/1 (1967), 20), he curiously made no mention of the Union Générale affair, which was obviously very much closer to the play's subject.
13. The choicest comment was perhaps Morlot's remark, in R.A.D., 14 (1889), 175, that "Presque repose sur une situation dont l'auteur n'a pas tiré grand parti."

The play's author was given by Wicks (29813) as "Champrello".

14. The title was given by Wicks (25382) as La Duchesse Potiphar.
15. He and his band had incidentally wiped out the garrison of the castle also. The play was sufficiently popular to be revived by the Escholiers on 21 January 1903.
16. E.g. Henderson, 23; Shattuck, 3.

DIVORCE

One of the most hotly-debated social issues of the day was the question of divorce. Since divorce had been abolished in France in 1816, when the Third Republic came into being the last resort in law for the maritally mismatched was legal separation; but after many years of hesitation, heated controversy and disappointing setbacks for its advocates, divorce was at last re-established by the Loi du 27 juillet 1884.

It was to be expected that the reintroduction of divorce would have significant repercussions in the theatre because of its close connection with the three most popular dramatic subjects: love, marriage and adultery. In the preface to L'Etrangère, Dumas predicted that if divorce legislation were passed, "Ce sera la transformation subite et complète de notre théâtre." It was assumed that it would put an immediate end to the flourishing dramatic theme of the mal marié(e), used, for instance, in Dumas's La Femme de Claude, Becque's L'Enlèvement and Augier's Madame Caverlet; and Dumas foresaw that future audiences would no longer understand much of the existing repertory, which might connive at a wife, indissolubly shackled to a brute, finding true love in an irregular union, or a betrayed husband killing his wife or her lover.

While some people supposed that divorce would itself become the subject of a spate of plays, others, including Zola and Lemaître, argued a priori that divorce was inherently undramatic, since drama was based on conflict while divorce was essentially a solution to strife.<sup>1</sup> Their



reasoning does not appear to have been swayed by the thought that numerous plays already existed which managed to accommodate legal separation, to which the same argument must apply.

As it turned out, literally dozens of plays dealing with divorce were staged before the end of the century. Understandably, a number of these were serious treatments of the social problems stemming from the breakdown of a marriage,<sup>2</sup> but an even greater number were comic. Surveying the field retrospectively in 1907, René Doumic wrote:

C'est d'abord par le ridicule que le théâtre s'était attaqué au divorce: la nouvelle situation faite aux époux par la loi était tout de suite apparue aux écrivains de théâtre par ses côtés funambulesques. Elle leur a fourni une ample moisson de rencontres saugrenues et de quiproquos abracadabrants; elle avait déchaîné l'éclat de rire de Divorçons et livré la scène à l'imbroglio des Surprises du divorce; le vaudeville se trouva soudain tout rajeuni et ragaillard. <sup>3</sup>

Actually, one of the most striking conclusions to emerge from analysing how the "new" subject was used by the comic theatre is precisely that most of its humour derived from existing traditions. Most comic plays about divorce fall within a few general categories. They may conveniently be divided first into two large classes according to whether divorce actually took place in them or not. In a very high proportion, divorce figured only as a threat which was averted, to produce what seems to have been taken as a happy ending.

Sardou and Najac's Divorçons! (Palais-Royal, 6 December 1886) was one of the most successful of all comedies about divorce and was often imitated. Divorce did not occur in the play, the mere possibility being enough to make the

disunited couple review their relationship, and the husband was able to win back his wife by manoeuvring himself into the supposedly advantageous role of lover, an idea later borrowed by Scholl in L'Amant de sa femme (1890). Though matters never got beyond the stage of intention, the discussions about divorce by Des Prunelles, Cyprienne and their guests in the first act were among the most wide-ranging and amusing explorations of the subject in any play of this period.

Several other plays in which divorce was more narrowly escaped were closely imitated from a very popular comedy of the pre-divorce era: Paul Ferrier's Chez l'avocat, created by Coquelin and Sarah Bernhardt at the Comédie-Française on 22 July 1873. In this, Charveron and his wife Marthe arrived independently at the chambers of M<sup>e</sup> Ducanois and clamoured for separation; but as they poured out their pent-up grievances they discovered that they were still in love, and so left reconciled.

A handful of comedies depicted a closer call still, in that a couple actually divorced but changed their minds and were reunited, in some cases on the very day that one partner was to marry someone else, as happened in Le Mari de ma femme by "Paul d'Ivoi" in 1888.

The divorce manqué play was apparently aimed at sentimentalists. The humour tended to be less sympathetic in the other category, those plays which showed the unforeseen drawbacks of divorce, or rather of remarriage, since this was normally the situation treated. Such plays may be further subdivided according to the basic joke that they expounded.

"Out of the frying-pan into the fire", potentially among the most promising jokes, was relatively little used, but may be seen in Brieux and Salandri's Le Bureau des divorces, when Champagnol got rid of his promiscuous Agathe only to be forced to marry the fearsome vitrioleuse Athénaïs.

The classic comedy of divorce, Bisson and Mars' Les Surprises du divorce (Vaudeville, 2 March 1888) could also be classed as an instance of this figure; but it was above all the locus classicus of a much more popular joke,<sup>4</sup> for as Jules Lemaître drily pointed out:

Le fond de la pièce, ce n'est (...) point la défense ou la condamnation du divorce, c'est la haine des belles-mères, sentiment légitime et excellent à coup sûr, sentiment français, sentiment national, mais dont l'expression et les effets comiques, toujours infaillibles d'ailleurs, manquent peut-être un peu de nouveauté.<sup>5</sup>

Whether she was presented as the reason for divorcing or as the price to be paid for remarrying, the mother-in-law furnished one of the basic jokes used in the comedy of divorce.

Another was the uncomfortable plight of the second husband who found that those around him still remembered and preferred the first, an idea entertainingly explored for three acts by Hippolyte Raymond and Gastyne in Les Maris d'une divorcée (Palais-Royal, 26 March 1892). This was not a new idea either, though, as it had often featured in the fairly numerous comedies on the risks of marrying a widow, which included Labiche and Moreau's Le Clou aux maris, Charles Raymond's L'Ombre d'Oscar and Bisson's Feu Toupinel.

Yet in marrying a widow a man was at least assured of not meeting his predecessor, which was one of the most

fundamental jokes about remarriage and a situation which audiences obviously considered inherently and irresistibly hilarious.<sup>6</sup> Its piquancy lay in the fact that the public apparently persisted in seeing their encounter as the rueful confrontation of two quasi-cuckolds, each of whom had "slept with the other's wife", in a sense which may seem tenuous to us. Both men were held to be in a false position, but the second husband, dogged by a "rival" from the outset, was generally deemed the more grotesque. Hence the presumption that he must be hypersensitive about his predecessor which accounts for the admiring surprise heard in Muserolle's aside about his replacement in Labiche and Duru's Doit-on le dire?: "C'est une bonne nature... il n'est pas jaloux de son prédécesseur" (II, viii), and Delorme's sudden testiness in this exchange about his step-son in Bernard Lopez' Les Ricochets du divorce:

Georgina - La présence de son père, votre prédécesseur, me cause trop d'embarras.

Delorme - Mon prédécesseur!... Assez, madame, assez...

(II, v)

So strong was this jealousy of the predecessor supposed to be that in Les Surprises du divorce Mme Bonnivard only induced Bourganeuf to marry her divorcee daughter by pretending the first husband was now dead:

Mme Bonnivard - J'avais eu soin, au préalable, d'apprendre à Bourganeuf que vous étiez mort.

Henri - Hein?

Mme Bonnivard - Quelque temps après votre divorce avec ma fille; et que par conséquent, il épousait en réalité, non pas une divorcée, ce qui lui était fort désagréable, mais une veuve.

(III, ii)

It could hardly be made plainer that the objection was not to the "second-hand" status of the wife in itself, but the existence of the other husband, who might turn up some day.<sup>7</sup> Mind-sets die hard, and even though the public may have grasped what divorce was supposed to be, they seem involuntarily to have seen multiple marriages in terms of the familiar comic traditions of infidelity.

Naturally, jokes about the grounds for divorce were similarly nourished by centuries of comedy about marital discord. As mentioned earlier, disruptive mothers-in-law were often blamed: Mme Bonnivard in Les Surprises du divorce and Antoinette's mother in Cressonois and Samson's Divorcés. Irritating personal habits made for some more original complaints. The hyperactive Clémence in Divorcés made her husband dance to exhaustion, and, even worse: "Elle fait du trapèze et déclame des vers" (iii). Spendthrift wives and mean husbands were sometimes cited (e.g. the Bellefaces in Le Bureau des divorces). Otherwise husbands were often divorced by their wives for desertion (as in Le Mari de ma femme) or for striking them, accidentally or deliberately, as in Les Maris d'une divorcée.

Predictably, though, sexual grievances were the commonest causes of divorce in comedy: adultery took pride of place, whether suspected, proved or even proclaimed, as in Stéphen Lemonnier's Pour divorcer or the Champagnols in Le Bureau des divorces, but sexual incompatibility was also a favourite, as in Les Ricochets du divorce and Le Bureau des divorces. In Spécialité pour divorce by "Noël Kolbac", comedy even ventured into the realms of Krafft-Ebbing with the case of the husband who jibbed at donning pink tights in

order to make him look like the tenor who had caught his wife's fancy.

Relatively few playwrights seized on those situations which were created by divorce, and by divorce alone. A few plays, mostly written before 1884, exploited the somewhat rudimentary comic idea of multiplying divorces absurdly: by the end of Les Ricochets du divorce, most of the men had been, were, or were about to be married to most of the women. More imaginatively, in Janvier and Ballot's Les Amants légitimes divorce was used by a loving but impecunious couple as a ruse to break the régime dotal and get hold of the wife's dowry. Paul Ferrier's L'Article 231 was one of the rare comedies to make good use of the sometimes odd terms of the divorce legislation itself, including the promising Article 298, which forbade "le mariage avec le complice d'adultère".<sup>8</sup> Such comedies looked for the specific comic potential of the new legislation, but most relied for their humour on old-established, stock jokes: the Mother-in-Law, the Second Husband, the Extravagant Wife, the Insatiable Wife, the Cuckold and the like.

What finally remains to be done is to determine whether the way that divorce was depicted in comic drama suggests anything about public reaction to the new element in French social life. Comedy offers only inconclusive indications about how society regarded the divorced person, more particularly the divorced woman, since the morality of women's conduct was always judged more exactingly. A very negative image emerged from Auguste Germain's rather rosse comedy La Paix du foyer of 1892. In its adulterous triangle, the "other woman" was a divorcee, Paule d'Argilès, and the

second act showed her social circle, a kind of demi-monde composed of other divorced women, all of them of easy virtue and severally addicted besides to gambling, whisky or morphine. The impression given was that divorce was inseparable from general depravity; but the whole work was extremely cynical in tone.

On the other hand, the neglected wife who divorced her philandering husband in Blum and Toché's Le Monde où l'on flirte of 1892 was a sympathetic enough character and at the end was allowed the consolation of marrying the dashing captain.

Yet on balance the comedy of this period does not seem to have approved of divorce. Naturally, nothing is to be concluded simply from the fact that nearly all comedies in which it occurred held divorce up to ridicule. It is part of the comic theatre's stock-in-trade to mock things which may be quite worthy in themselves, if need be playing devil's advocate and inventing baroque shortcomings for the purpose. Thus marriage has been twitted steadily since comedy began, yet this indicates no fundamental disapproval of the institution since the favourite way of rewarding sympathetic characters and furnishing a happy ending has always been a wedding.

However, the way that divorce was handled in the comedy of this period gave the impression that before the final curtain was rung down audiences liked to be shown divorce failing, in one way or another. The most popular resolution was that separation should be averted altogether, as in Divorçons, L'Article 231 and the rest of the numerous divorce manqué group. Even when divorce actually occurred,

it was simply undone and the original couple reunited in quite a significant number of plays, including Divorcés!, Le Mari de ma femme and Les Maris d'une divorcée. Failing this, divorce was usually discredited by showing the party who had instigated it much worse off than before, as in Les Surprises du divorce. In scarcely any of the comedies of this period was divorce presented as beneficial and problem-solving, as it would be, for instance, in Feydeau's Occupe-toi d'Amélie of 1908.<sup>9</sup> Despite the success of Naquet and his fellow campaigners in getting the law changed, therefore, comic playwrights seem to have catered to a lingering distaste for the idea of divorce in public opinion.



## Divorce: Footnotes

1. See Zola, "Le Divorce et la littérature", and Lemaître, Impressions, 3, 339-40.
2. Such as Brioux's Le Berceau (1898) and Hervieu's Les Tenailles (1895) and La Loi de l'homme (1897).
3. Doumic, Le Théâtre nouveau, 174-75. In the preface to L'Enlèvement (1897), Becque too observed: "Le divorce, il faut bien le dire, n'a profité jusqu'ici qu'aux vaudevillistes."
4. See Boston, 51-59.
5. Lemaître, Impressions, 3, 339. C.E. Montague thought it the definitive comedy on the subject: "After his Surprises du divorce the theatre ought to have relinquished, as a completed work, its immemorial pre-occupation with the mother-in-law. All other dramatic handlings of that theme are leaflets to this treatise; mere tentative borings into that seam of comic effect, compared with this capacious and branching mine. With Les Surprises du divorce a topic was played out, and though we may all be bored by later farcical hits at the mother-in-law, Les Surprises always seems piquant; it has the lasting freshness of the best thing of a kind." (Dramatic Values, 69).
6. Writing about serious problem plays on divorce, Doumic noted: "Toute pièce sur le divorce doit mettre en présence le premier mari et l'autre. C'est la scène à faire. Et elle est difficile à faire, la situation étant de celles qu'on a toutes les peines du monde à tenir dans la note grave." (Le Théâtre nouveau, 179).
7. The spectator psychology implied here was clearly identical with that described by Dumas in August 1879: "Le public n'admet jamais (...) qu'un héros de théâtre épouse une femme qu'il sait avoir eu un amant avant lui, sans que le futur mari n'ait préalablement tué son prédécesseur dans un duel où Dieu devra toujours opter pour le second. Cependant il acceptera peut-être, mais avec moins de bonne grâce et de confiance, un départ de l'amant pour un pays très éloigné avec toutes les garanties possibles (comment les lui donner?) que les deux époux ne le rencontreront plus." (Preface to L'Etrangère).
8. Also touched on but not exploited in Les Surprises du divorce (III, ix). The provision was not repealed until December 1904.
9. Obviously, Le Monde où l'on flirte was such a play.

DUELLING

Duelling would seem to have been virtually endemic in French society in the latter part of the nineteenth century. André Billy, who wrote some informative pages on the subject in L'Epoque 1900, noted:

Nous avons sous les yeux une liste probablement incomplète des duels politiques, journalistiques et littéraires qui eurent lieu de 1885 à 1895. Elle en contient 150.<sup>1</sup>

As these words imply, besides those caused by purely personal quarrels, a duel was not an uncommon retort to a hostile literary critic or journalist, or to a political opponent. The number of encounters often rose significantly at moments of political tension, like the Boulanger crisis or the Dreyfus affair, which were all too common in the troubled early years of the republic. It was not without reason, perhaps, that the jealous Norancey in Meilhac and Halévy's La Veuve counted on political discussion as a sure-fire method for bringing about a duel with the man he thought his rival:

J'irai retrouver monsieur de Léoneins,  
nous irons ensemble au cercle, j'amènerai  
tout doucement la conversation sur la  
politique, nous nous querellons, et demain...  
(I, vii)

Duels were followed by the general public much like sporting events. An interesting passage of arms might bring sizeable crowds to Villebon or the Grande Jatte, and newspapers (the Gil Blas in particular) carried detailed reports - one is tempted to call them reviews - of major encounters.

Since duels were, then, a familiar part of everyday life, and one which was dramatic by its very nature moreover, it is not surprising that they were a common ingredient in the drama of the time. Understandably, they were very often treated

seriously, but they also had their place in comedy.

Duelling was one of the aspects of traditional aristocratic culture borrowed by the middle classes in an endeavour to create a style of living for themselves in keeping with their economic and political dominance in society. It was, in a sense, one of the gratuitous graces which they associated with refinement and sophistication, like a taste for opera and the classics. However, since the practice did not arise organically from essential middle-class values, it remained to some extent in unresolved contradiction with them, creating a potential for comic situations.

Labiche in particular had shown that the middle-class duel was a rich source of comedy, because it presented his stereotyped bourgeois with an agonizing dilemma between his innate (and unavowed) horror of risks and his yearning to play the gentleman, which made losing face nearly as unthinkable as hazarding his life. The comedy most often lay in showing how far he would go to avoid personal danger without actually refusing outright to meet the demands of honour.

One solution to the problem had been seen in Le Voyage de M. Perrichon: Perrichon continued to profess his readiness to fight while secretly moving heaven and earth to get a third party to stop him. Another shift, essentially ridiculous because based on a contradiction, was to devise a duel without risks. In Un pied dans le crime of 1866, the adversaries had had the comfort of knowing that the local pair of pistols could be relied upon to misfire; but such perfect security was rarely possible. The best the bourgeois could usually hope for was a duel in which his own safety at least was guaranteed. Thus in Labiche's Vingt-neuf degrés à l'ombre

(Palais-Royal, 9 April 1873), Pomadour, as the offended husband, was full of fight for as long as he believed that an invariable custom in these affairs forbade the lover to defend himself.

The risks could be somewhat reduced by what was termed an "American duel", in which the winner was not exposed to any physical danger. The expression was used, or rather misused, in Augier and Labiche's Le Prix Martin for what was actually a Wild West shoot-out with carbines: "Le duel à l'américaine... à l'affût... comme pour les lapins" (III, x); but there was a genuine duel à l'américaine in Labiche and Gille's Les Trente millions de Gladiator (IV, x) when Gladiator and Eusèbe played a hand of écarté, with the understanding that the loser was to shoot himself within two hours. A baroque variant on the same idea in Bernard Lopez' Les Ricochets du divorce (II, vi) was that one party, determined by lot, should spend an hour confined with a boa-constrictor.<sup>2</sup>

For a character to back down from a duel was a last resort, inviting the contempt of the play's other characters and of the audience, too. There was an unexpectedly unsympathetic, even cruel quality about Tristan Bernard's Le Vrai courage (Grand-Guignol, 14 October 1899), which showed a man abasing himself further and further in order to avoid challenging another who had struck him publicly. In Barrière's one-act comedy Un Monsieur qui attend des témoins (Vaudeville, 10 June 1873), a man only too ready to avert a duel with an apology, but prevented from offering it by the bellicosity of his seconds, was ridiculed with the same scorn the author had expressed for such poltroons in Les Parisiens of 1854.

It was Labiche once again, in Vingt-neuf degrés à l'ombre, whose fancy imagined an evasion at least as ignominious as these yet blandly, ludicrously unabashed, when Pomadour solemnly commuted a challenge to a duel into a stiff fine. The playwright was evidently so pleased with this inspired satirical invention that he used it again in Le Prix Martin.

It will be apparent from the foregoing that most comedy about duelling tended to condone it tacitly, to the extent that ridicule was directed against those who tried to avoid its exigencies or who crassly misinterpreted its spirit. Yet there was another variety of comedy associated with duelling which might on occasion subvert the practice itself. The solemn ritual of the duello and its pretensions to a kind of chivalric nobility could be rendered grotesque when the combat was fought with unorthodox or even bizarre weapons. This had not perhaps been the case with the classic precedent, the duel à la tasse de lait in Labiche and Martin's La Main leste of 1867, because there the main point of the joke was again bourgeois pusillanimity, not the travesty of duelling in itself; but the cases cited earlier of the Guatemalan with his carbine and the American with his boa-constrictor did tend to undermine the dignity of the institution.

In La Dame de chez Maxim (III, xvii), Feydeau dwelt maliciously on the outrage of the traditionalist seconds when Petypon exercised his choice of weapons in favour of scalpels.<sup>3</sup> In Feydeau's first play, Par la fenêtre, Hector was led to expect an even more outlandish passage of arms with Emma's jealous husband:

Ce sera un duel à mort, je ne l'ignore pas!  
il me l'a dit souvent. Il se battra, comme on se  
bat dans notre pays... au vilebrequin... C'est  
comme cela que nous nous battons au Brésil. (ii)

It will be noted that yet again the strange ways of a foreigner were used to place an accepted French custom in an unfamiliar perspective, so that in spite of its aristocratic associations and ritualized mystique, duelling was made to look like a form of armed aggression against another person.

Duels loomed but rarely took place in comedy: the encounter itself was not very good comic material. When Cardinet, in Meilhac and Halévy's Le Prince, took the field and, stumbling on a stone, wounded the prince by accident, Zola commented: "C'est là le seul duel possible au Palais-Royal".<sup>4</sup>

In Léon Hennique's strange satire L'Argent d'autrui, created at the Odéon on 9 February 1893, Lafontas was severely wounded in a duel, but this was to achieve an ironic happy ending: believing himself dying, the swindler repented and vowed to repay his victims, gaining the hand of Miss Kate as his reward.

In general though, as we have seen, the comedy stemmed from the mere prospect of a duel, the fear it inspired in the participants and the evasive expedients that this drove them to. Few dramatists appear to have considered that the validity of the custom itself could be treated as open to question.

1. A Billy, L'Epoque 1900, 384.
2. Wicks recorded a one-act comedy called Un duel à l'américaine, by Fraisse, given at the Théâtre d'Application on 20 December 1893 (Wicks 25384).
3. He had prepared this effect by poking fun also at the grave formality of the protocol surrounding the duel.
4. In Le Bien public, 4 December 1876.

FOREIGNERS

Foreigners were not strictly speaking a new phenomenon in French life of course, but they did acquire a new importance in the second half of the nineteenth century. If foreigners had always existed, and were established as occasional figures in comedy even by Molière's day, they became more numerous and more visible from the time of the Second Empire.

Napoleon III himself had spent most of his life to the age of forty abroad and was mindful of the support and friendship he had received from certain foreigners during those years. Furthermore, when the Second Empire came into being, many of legitimist and Orleanist sympathies, not to mention republicans, tended to maintain their distance from the court and Bonapartist high society, as far as they could discreetly do so. In the main, though, foreigners did not have the same qualms about endorsing the regime's legitimacy by mingling with imperial society, and they were welcomed to fill something of a social void created around the Emperor and his partisans.

This consideration was among the reasons for the deliberate (and successful) promotion of Paris as the pleasure capital of the world. The establishment of Paris as a tourist Mecca was greatly helped too by the continuing expansion of the French railway system, which made travel much more rapid and convenient.

The result was a widening of the mental horizons of French society, which had to come to terms with the presence in its midst of a growing body of people alien in language, customs and outlook. The entertaining side of this rather



uncomfortable adjustment of French values and assumptions had already been extensively exploited by the theatre of the Second Empire, and it continued to be important in the comedy of the Third Republic.

It is important to recognize, however, that the cultural friction between French and foreign was by no means always seen in comic terms. There is ample evidence that the foreign presence in Paris was commonly seen as a serious, and even dangerous social problem, and particular anxiety was provoked by the influential myth of the Foreign Woman.

The locus classicus for this type was Dumas fils' play L'Etrangère of 1876. It strikes one at once that although the pivot of the play's action and thought was the human vibrion, the Duc de Septmonts, the title directed attention instead to Mrs Clarkson, a shrewd strategy, to judge by Zola's reaction: "Quel heureux type, quel titre plein de promesses, dans ce seul mot: L'Etrangère!"<sup>1</sup>

F.A. Taylor, though generally well enough disposed to Dumas, found the play itself and its thesis preposterous:

What does Dumas take us for? It is a strange and weird creation, an odd echo of Dumas's contention that society is breaking away from the old anchors of order and respectability; that Europe and more particularly France are becoming corrupted by alien forces; but try as he could he could never invent a less convincing proof of the danger.<sup>2</sup>

The significant point is that the proof was convincing enough when it merely confirmed suspicions already held by many of the public.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting that even those critics, like Zola, who found fault with the depiction of Mrs Clarkson did not object to the melodramatic exaggeration of the role, as Taylor did, but rather the contrary: they thought it spoiled by too much

concrete detail, which turned a monster into a tall woman in a red dress. It was held a mistake that the "Vierge du Mal" should fall in love with Gérard, and that her destructive hatred should be rationalized as vengeance for the racial discrimination she had suffered. Such human emotions detracted from her mystery and her menace. Apparently a more abstract, mythic portrayal would have been preferred, and, as we have seen, when Pailleron staged his comedy L'Age ingrat two years later, the critics commended his tact in leaving Countess Julia enigmatic, and wished only that the whole play had been devoted to such a disturbing creature.

Whatever the differences in their presentation, Mrs Clarkson and Julia summoned up identical fears from the public's collective unconscious. It was Dumas's work that Parigot had in mind when he wrote in 1893 of "le genre de ferment que le rastaquouérisme féminin sème dans nos mœurs et qui achève de les désorganiser";<sup>4</sup> yet his words echoed almost verbatim what J.J. Weiss had written in 1881 about Pailleron's comedy:

Nul n'a marqué d'une psychologie plus spirituelle ni mis plus vivement en relief la nature de ce brillant parasite, le genre de ferment qu'il apporte dans les mœurs françaises et comment il les désorganise.<sup>5</sup>

So if the foreigner in Paris was not strictly a new theme, it was one which Frenchmen of the time felt had a burning topicality. As Zola wrote (in terms tinged with unwitting irony):

Rien de vrai et de neuf comme ce type. Il est une des caractéristiques de notre époque, il appartient à notre société, à notre Paris si hospitalier, si libre, si amoureux de plaisirs.<sup>6</sup>

The subject was treated by the theatre both in serious vein (as in L'Etrangère, or Sardou's Dora and Daniel Rochat) and

comically. While some comic playwrights showed little interest in its comic potential (Becque, Renard, Courteline and Rostand, for example), others like Labiche, Meilhac, Pailleron, Sardou and Feydeau used it fairly extensively.

The aspect of the foreigner which most obviously lent itself to comic exploitation was his ignorance or his misuse of French, and much play was made with mutual incomprehension, uncouth accents, grotesque syntax, malapropisms and the unconscious and hair-raising misapplication of argot.

Linguistic incompetence is in itself a very ready source of humour, but mostly of a fairly shallow kind. Some playwrights put it to more effective use by presenting it as merely the external symptom of a much more fundamental cultural décalage. Stuart Baker has observed of Feydeau's foreigners:

Their abuse of language is only the most obvious example of their disregard of the forms and conventions that are the hallmarks of civilised society.<sup>7</sup>

This was the aspect of the foreigner which most concerned Dumas, Pailleron, Parigot and Weiss. The foreigner could disrupt and even call into question accepted French manners and values by adhering to his own quite different code, either through ignorance or wilfully. To make matters worse, the bemused Frenchman often could not be sure which was the cause, and might uneasily suspect that it was sometimes wilfulness masquerading as ignorance. Did Papaguanos realize that his tutoiement of everyone suggested insupportable arrogance, or not? -

Doubtless the inscrutable foreigner had his own standards, customs and etiquette, but their pattern could not be grasped. If his culture did have the normal restraints, reticences and hypocrisies of any decent society, none of them seemed to be in

the right place. The candour of his personal remarks could be brutal, the directness of his sexual advances shocking.

The thing that made the Frenchman feel most insecure was his inability to read the foreigner's phatic signals. Maggy's placid demeanour left Vatelín quite unprepared for her matter-of-fact revelation that she proposed to lace his tea with strychnine. Misled by Irrigua's apparent affability, Bois-d'Enghien came within an ace of the fatal admission that he was Lucette's lover. The nightmarish unpredictability of the foreigner was just like that of a lunatic.

Of course, his eccentricity would not have mattered quite so much if it had affected only his own conduct; but all too often the French characters found themselves reluctantly involved in alarming behaviour governed by utterly arcane rules, as if dancing to a tune they did not know. Their plight was often made worse by the circumstance (established by Baker for Feydeau's foreigners, but actually of more general validity) that the alien was usually endowed with a daunting energy and a powerful personality which quite overbore his relatively weak, meek French victims.<sup>8</sup>

The essence of the Frenchman's relation to the foreigner, then, was bewilderment at the least, sometimes frustration, and quite likely fear, although the foreigner himself as often as not gave no sign that he intended or even realized this. Frequently the affable ones proved the worst tormentors. Papaguanos had a great wealth of effusive affection in his nature and a sentimental cult of the family, but was simply all the more insufferable on that account.

To analyse in any greater detail what the comedy of the period suggests Frenchmen thought of foreigners, it is

necessary to subdivide what so far has been considered as a single, undifferentiated class. In Stuart E. Baker's valuable study of Georges Feydeau and the Aesthetics of Farce, the author found it convenient to reduce all foreigners to just two basic types: aristocrats and non-aristocrats; but for other purposes, it is probably worthwhile distinguishing specific nationalities or races.

Naturally, not all foreign peoples were equally well represented in comic drama. Because of the importance and proximity of Britain, it seems reasonable that there should have been more English than African, Polynesian or even Scandinavian specimens offered; but it is not so immediately apparent why the Japanese were preferred to the Chinese, or why Canadians should have been so far outnumbered by Latin Americans.

Since a more wide-ranging treatment would be inappropriate in the present context, six topics have been chosen for further examination: France's neighbour nations, the Germans, Belgians and British, supplemented by three ethnic groups which seem to have been particularly favoured by comic playwrights, Americans, East Europeans (especially Russians) and Latins.

#### 1. Germans

As far as Germans were concerned, the interesting thing, obviously, is how French comedy presented a nation against which France bore a grudge. It is this (and only this) that lends a slight interest to the Prussian shoemaker Bottmann in the feeble à-propos-pochade by Buguet and Charlet entitled J' vais t'enl'ver l' Prussien!, staged at the Folies-Desnoyez on 4 August 1870. Given the date and circumstances of its

composition, it is not surprising that the hastily improvised piece appears now as chauvinisme de café-concert of the vilest, reliant on much brandishing of the tricolour and airy derision of the Prussian army. In the context of the play's swaggering optimism, Prussians could not appear in any way sinister or formidable, so Bottmann was presented as a grotesque fool with a comic accent, and a shifty poltroon. Thus, when Anatole Rissolé scornfully challenged him: "Comment, tu es Prussien, et vous osez potiner ici? Quand la guerre, la guerre sans trêve ni merci, est déclaré à ton pays de choux rances?", the abject Bottmann could only whine ingratiatingly: "Que fus êtes pête!... che suis Brussien bar les pottes, mais che suis Vrançais bar le coeur." (iii)

It is most striking that the attitude towards the enemy incited by this war-time propaganda piece was simply contempt, and not the hatred which subsequent wars have taught us to expect.

In the post-war period, Germans (even including the occasional Austrian) were relatively few in French comedy. Several reasons might be advanced to account for this. In the first place, in the years immediately following the war, the French authorities were particularly careful to avoid any reference which might give offence in Berlin. Nor was this caution misplaced: the German government was genuinely sensitive and vigilant about Germany's image in France.

Besides, anything which might remind a French audience of France's bitter defeat would tend to invite gloomy or angry thoughts out of keeping with the carefree spirit of comedy. Germans simply ceased to be particularly funny.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Belgians

There were two chief components in the stage stereotype of the Belgian. In the first place, he was taken for a simple soul, which might only imply a slightly rough diamond, but usually meant that he was a dull-witted naïf. Such, for example, was the manservant Bretel in Feydeau's 1896 one-acter Les Pavés de l'ours, a title which adequately outlined his character; or another valet, Eloi, in Dormez, je le veux (1897), whom Feydeau set in contrast with a Parisian colleague, Justin, sharp and débrouillard.

The other, major factor in the stage Belgian was his distinctive speech, which was held irresistibly funny on account of its accent, its belgicisms of vocabulary and syntax, and its strange oaths.<sup>10</sup> It would be impossible to find a better example of the convention than the opening lines of Dormez, je le veux:

Justin                   - Tiens, viens par ici, toi l'enflammé...  
Apporte ton colis.

Eloi (accent belge) - Ouie, ouie, ouie, ça pèse, tu  
sais, à c't'heure. (Déposant sa malle  
au milieu de la scène.) Ouf! Ça est  
bon tout de même pour une fois de  
respirer comme qui dirait des épaules.

Justin                   - Ah! bien, c'est pas moi qui m'amuserais  
à trimbalier des fardeaux pareils.

Eloi                     - Gotteferdeck, si tu crois que c'est pour  
mon amusement! C'est mon maître qui me  
colle ça à porter, savez-vous (i).

As may be apparent, the role of the Belgian in French comedy was in some ways similar to that of the Irishman in English comedy of the same period.

## 3. Anglo-Saxons

The French of the fin de siècle were perhaps more prone

than we are today to think in terms of race, as distinct from nationality. Obviously such a generalization does not pretend to do anything more than suggest a trend in the relative emphasis placed on the two concepts. Legal citizenship was quite often important, of course: as whenever the subject of Alsace or Lorraine arose. Yet it is noticeable how much of the debate about the modern theatre, for instance, was conducted using the notions of Scandinavian, Slav and Latin, rather than Norwegian, Swedish, Russian and French; and one can get the impression that some Frenchmen felt that Belgians (viewed as a sort of provincials) were less alien than French Jews.

This habit of thought may have had something to do with the fact that the French of this period were apparently very conscious of Britons and Americans as members of one "Anglo-Saxon race". There was at this time some anxiety about an English-speaking bloc which was seen as something of a threat to France, both as a political rival and as an insidious influence on French civilization. In 1897, a widely-read book by Edmond Demolins sought to discover wherein lay the superiority of the Anglo-Saxons, eliciting an assurance from Gaston Rouvier, in Grandeur et décadence des Français (1898) that if the Latins were in decay, the Anglo-Saxons were decaying faster. All parties to this on-going debate agreed at least on the assumption that an effectively homogeneous Anglo-Saxon race and culture was a valid concept.

In some measure the theatre, too, treated Americans and British simply as Anglo-Saxons. Occasionally, the precise nationality of an English-speaking character was left undetermined, like that of Countess Julia in Pailleron's L'Age



ingrat. Sometimes, it seems, the author himself was not too sure of the difference: in Labiche and Gille's Les Trente millions de Gladiator (1875), the American plutocrat's full name was given as "sir Richard Gladiator" (or "sir Gladiator" for short, of course).<sup>11</sup>

It is possible, then, to indicate certain traits which the English and the American stage stereotypes had in common. As a race, Anglo-Saxons were generally shown as brisk, physically robust, somewhat aggressive in their manner, and above all businesslike, as shown by their habit of quoting, in English or in French, such terse maxims as "Time is money" and "Business is business".<sup>12</sup>

In their dealings with women, the men were often cold, showing little sentiment or gallantry. This belief had a definite bearing on why it was that the foreign woman was considered more dangerous than her male counterpart to the French social fabric. According to the invaluable Parigot, the "lords et Yankees" were more the objects of curiosity than of imitation, because their ways were so strange; moreover,

la femme a sur eux moins d'empire; ils ont pour elle un goût qui, sans exclure les folies, s'exaspère rarement jusqu'au culte: peuple jeune, que la chevalerie bourgeoise n'a pas livré, pieds et poings liés, à une adoration délicieuse et tyrannique...<sup>13</sup>

Anglo-Saxon women were brought up to be rather startlingly independent and self-assured. Although in general they were perhaps healthy and practical rather than very feminine or attractive, there were outstanding exceptions, like the Countess Julia: exotic femmes fatales capable of exercising almost irresistible fascination over French men.

It might be pointed out that, whether it was because Anglo-Saxon men were too preoccupied with business, or because

they frequently lacked finesse in such matters, comedies more often showed a Frenchman in love with an English or American girl than a Frenchwoman wooed and won by an Anglo-Saxon.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.i Britons

Turning to the specific image of Britons in comedy, it is probably worthwhile beginning by recalling that, after the Germans, the English<sup>15</sup> were certainly the most unpopular of European nations in French public opinion during this period.<sup>16</sup> There were, to be sure, individual anglophiles among the upper and even middle classes<sup>17</sup> (Alphone Allais was a notable example), but in general the English were disliked, distrusted, and to some extent even feared as part of the supposed encroachment by the Anglo-Saxons on France's political, colonial, economic, strategic and cultural interests already noted.

It is the more necessary to establish this as an axiom because for some reason this attitude did not really show through in the comic theatre of the period. In other words, the stage English were not, on the whole, depicted as negatively as might have been expected, given the prevailing general opinion.

Furthermore, the way in which they were depicted on stage made surprisingly little capital of the vices traditionally associated with the British: their notorious perfidy, the cant anglais or the morgue britannique. Taken all in all, for instance, the comedies of the day showed the morgue of the East-European aristocracy far more than that of the British.

Some of them did exemplify the well-known English disdain for foreign languages. Hogson, in L'Anglais tel qu'on le parle

and Miss Betting in Un fil à la patte were monoglot to good comic effect, and Betty Hogson and Maggy Soldignac, in Le Dindon, spoke broken French full of amusing solecisms. On the other hand, Lucy Watson spoke French fluently in Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie, and the mysteriously veiled admiral's lady who figured in the prologue to Meilhac and Halévy's La Roussote was credited with a very idiomatic grasp of the language.

Certain other national idiosyncrasies were gently mocked on occasion. The English addiction to tea was acknowledged by Feydeau in Le Dindon:

Faut pas demander de quel pays elle est, celle-là!...  
Ces English, je crois qu'ils n'iraient pas au buen  
retiro sans emporter leur théière. (II, ix)

Feydeau also often adverted to the readiness of the English to resort to fisticuffs. In Le Dindon he made the point particularly striking by showing that the practice had infected not only the Marseilles-born Soldignac, but even his wife Maggy, who boxed Vatelin into submission in Act II scene x, and then squared up to the policeman holding her in scene xviii.

On the whole, though, satire of the English was relatively mild in the comedy of the period, despite their unpopularity with the French public at large, as attested by the newspapers of the time. An instructive case was the character of Lucy Watson in Pailleron's Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie, strongly marked by the received national stereotype, and yet finally revealed as something considerably more complex.

Initially, the character seemed an unsympathetic one. She appeared in the first scene searching for a letter, attached to which there was clearly a secret she would rather not have known, and this gave her a somewhat louche air.

In Act I scene vii, the sympathetic Duchesse de Réville

dismissed her as:

Une jeune fille qui a des lunettes et qui n'a pas de gorge (...). Une manière d'aérolithe qui est tombé ici pour quinze jours et y est depuis deux ans, une pédante qui correspond avec les savants, qui traduit Schopenhauer,

or, more succinctly, as "Cette banquise anglaise." Her disapproval appeared clear again in the following scene, where she criticized Lucy in person for wearing spectacles:

La Duchesse - Pourquoi donc portez-vous des infamies pareilles?

Lucy - Parce que je n'y vois pas sans cela, Madame.

La Duchesse - La belle raison! (A part) Elle est pratique. J'ai horreur de cela moi!

The drift of all this appears obvious: in addition to being shifty and pedantic, Lucy is a typical stock English-woman - practical, cold and physically unappealing; in a word unfeminine, by the Duchesse's standards.

Yet this simplistic caricature was immediately undermined, as the Duchesse's aside continued: "C'est égal, elle est moins maigre que je ne croyais. Ces Anglaises ont d'aimables surprises."<sup>18</sup> Throughout the remainder of the play, there was the same alternation of negative and positive traits in Lucy's characterization. Lucy truly was what the Duchesse would consider pedantic, rather owlshly high-brow, and her lack of emotional warmth was genuine, mocked in Act III scene iv in the conversation with Bellac about platonic love. On the other hand, the same scene showed that our earlier impression of her as sly and secretive was entirely unjust. The secrecy surrounding the letter and the assignation it proposed was wholly of Bellac's making, in fact, and she reproached him for it. He defended himself by asking how else he was to manage a private

conversation with her. Her reply is interesting:

Lucy - Il fallait me donner le bras et sortir du salon avec moi, tout simplement. Je ne suis pas une jeune fille française, moi.

Bellac - Mais vous êtes en France.

Lucy - En France comme ailleurs, je fais ce que je veux; je n'ai pas besoin de secret, et encore moins de mystère. Vous déguisez votre écriture. Vous ne signez pas... Il n'est pas jusqu'à votre papier rose... Ah! que vous êtes bien Français!

Here candour and deviousness are made matters of national character, but - surprizingly - it was the Englishwoman who was given the beau rôle by the playwright.

The point made by this speech, that English women exercised greater freedom of conduct than French women, was stressed several times in the play; and their claim to do so without scandal seemed to be more or less generally accepted. In Act II scene vii, Mme de Ceran seemed to excuse in Lucy "une indépendance d'allures, conséquence de sa nationalité" which she certainly would not have tolerated in Suzanne, and not simply because Suzanne was younger.

There were, of course, limits to this greater freedom, and Lucy fled from the conservatory at the end of her tête à tête with Bellac feeling "horriblement compromise." From the spectator's omniscient point of view, the worst damage her character had sustained was that their burlesque wooing had made both Bellac and Lucy appear ridiculous, an effect enhanced by Jeanne and Paul Raymond's mocking imitation in scene v. Once again, however, Pailleron allowed Lucy to regain the public's sympathy with the admirable directness and dignity of her final lines. When the Duchesse called upon her to marry Bellac, with the comment: "Ah! il faut réparer, mon enfant!" (and mon enfant hinted that the Duchesse herself had warmed a

little towards Lucy since the first act), Lucy coolly replied:

- Il ne peut y avoir réparation; il n'y a pas  
faute, Madame, et vous avez tort de dire 'Il faut'.

Bellac - Comment?

Lucy - Mes sentiments étant d'accord avec ma volonté.

And, fittingly, "ma volonté" would be her last words in the play.

It may seem unkind of the playwright to pack her off with a foolish, conceited, unctuous academic ténor like Bellac, but although Lucy's differences from the French women in the comedy were stressed, and sometimes mildly mocked, on the whole her portrait was by no means an unpleasant one.

To sum up, satire of the English was more restrained than might have been anticipated, on the whole. It is curious to notice that there were some well-established myths which the comic playwrights usually refrained from exploiting. There was no concerted effort made to suggest that the English were frigid lovers, for example, or that their women were invariably unattractive, with frizzy red hair, flat chests and large feet. In fact, the roles they were called upon to fulfil in comedy more often than not belied these asperities.<sup>19</sup> On balance, they were probably treated more kindly than Americans, for instance: they were shown as eccentric rather than grotesque, and their shortcomings were foibles rather than real vices.

### 3.ii Americans

The proverbial indifference to geography of the French could hardly be more convincingly borne out than by the chimerical United States invented by their comic dramatists of the nineteenth century. In Sardou's L'Oncle Sam (1873), for

example, the spectator was informed that the widowed Mme Bellamy had come to America with her Creole husband, who had returned home because of "une succession à recueillir dans le Sud", only to be told a moment later that in this case "the South" was "sur la frontière du Connecticut et du Massachusetts."<sup>20</sup> (I, iii) More dubious still: in Bernard Lopez' four-act comedy Les Ricochets du divorce (1879), the wealthy Barnabé Brown presented himself in terms which grew less convincing with each additional detail: "Je suis un pionnier de l'Arkansas, un trappeur des forêts vierges, un Yankee pur sang." (III, vi)<sup>21</sup>

With so much vagueness about the topography of America, it is no wonder that the broad regional differences in its population were also blurred, that urban Yankees, Western frontiersmen and Southern colonels were promiscuously confused. Maurice Baudin, in his essay on "L'Américain dans le théâtre français", considered that a single type of American had been generalized by French playwrights:

L'Américain de l'Ouest, l'Américain de M. de Tocqueville, est un type qui a complètement disparu. C'est à New-York qu'il faut chercher l'Américain-type. Voilà qui simplifie les choses.<sup>22</sup>

Actually, L'Oncle Sam did purport to depict, in Colonel Nathaniel Fliburty, "Un homme de l'Ouest, le Yankee d'autrefois!... Un type qui s'en va!..." (I, iii), but in reality, both by his outlook and behaviour, Fliburty was wholly indistinguishable from Tapplebot or Fairfax.

Nevertheless, the image of Americans was not quite as simple as Baudin suggested. Southerners were thought to be different, for instance, in that they were supposed to be particularly passionate by virtue of their native climate. At least, Barnabé Brown's ex-wife Georgina appeared to account for

"ses élans de passion volcanique" by the fact that he was "un natif des états du Sud," (I, iv) and similarly Labiche and Gille's *Gladiator* thought the contrast between Pepitt's dourness and his own amorous habits was adequately explained by saying: "Parce que tu es du Nord... mais, moi, je suis du Sud... je suis de la zone torride!" (II, i)

Southerners apart, perhaps three main classes of stage Americans might be distinguished in French comedy, with the restriction, though, that the categories often overlapped. For the sake of convenience, the three sub-types will be referred to here as "Yankees", "Palais-Royal Americans" and "Mormons".

The Yankees correspond more or less to what Baudin considered the Américain-type: wealthy urban entrepreneurs, for the most part, and as Baudin suggested, usually from the northeastern United States, insofar as this had any real meaning for playwright or public. The men were socially uncouth; dynamic; quick to assess a situation (having the famous coup d'oeil américain), to devise a plan, and to take action to turn things to their benefit; constantly preoccupied with money-making schemes; and quite without probity in business. The vast wealth most possessed was almost invariably gained by some ruthless swindle.<sup>23</sup> The women were bold, calculating, and avid to land a titled French husband.<sup>24</sup>

The type seems to have been consecrated largely by the example of Sardou's four-act comedy L'Oncle Sam, created at the Vaudeville on 6 November 1873. As was noted earlier, the play had been banned for a while to avoid giving offence to the United States; and indeed it was vehemently and deliberately anti-American in tone.<sup>25</sup> The author was apparently at pains to discredit the impression of America conveyed by Alexis



de Tocqueville's famous study La Démocratie en Amérique (1835-39), expressly derided in the dialogue as an "Amérique en sucre". (I, iii) Sardou's own depiction of the country, its inhabitants and their way of life seems to bear a close resemblance to the negative picture given by Dickens in the American Notes (1842) and Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-44).

Yet if the Yankee was the commonest variety of American in comedy, in vaudeville the predominant type was the slightly different convention here called the "Palais-Royal American". The name is borrowed from Zola's review of Le Voyage à Philadelphie, a folie-vaudeville in four acts created at the Ambigu on 31 July 1876. Zola wrote that to liven up the piece the authors - Eugène Grangé, Victor Bernard and Henry Buguet - had resorted to

un de ces terribles Américains du Palais-Royal, un chasseur des pampas, exaspéré de jalousie, lancé à la poursuite de son épouse infidèle, avec des revolvers dans ses poches et des poignards à sa ceinture.<sup>26</sup>

In this type, the Yankee's energy was exaggerated to a pitch of frenzy, and where the Yankee was unpolished, these trappeurs and chasseurs were positively half-wild. The most obvious difference between the two, though, was in their emotional temperament. The Yankee had a hard-headed coldness about him, whereas these rough and ready men were fearsomely volatile and violent, settling their differences with the revolvers they all kept handy.<sup>27</sup> One might say that the Yankee was a harder, more abrasive, more vulgar version of the stage Englishman, but the "Palais-Royal American" was very close to the Latin stereotype.<sup>28</sup> As unpredictable eccentrics prone to violence, they were a variety of the archetypal alien, the nemesis and particular nightmare of the stage bourgeois.

Though this kind of American constituted a distinct sub-type, hybrids were not uncommon in comedy. Fairfax in L'Oncle Sam ended by brandishing a revolver, and there was even a touch of the "Palais-Royal American" in the formidable Clarkson of Dumas's L'Etrangère.

Although Mormons were expressly identified as such, in a way that Baptists, Methodists or Episcopalians were not, no specific character traits were ascribed to them and they might belong to either of the categories already discussed, or a blend of both. No doubt the interest in Mormons shown by the French comic theatre was partly due to the disdainful amusement generally felt for the Americans' eccentric penchant for home-made religions, guyed in L'Oncle Sam in the person of the Rev. Jedediah Buxton; but why the Mormons were singled out (rather than the Shakers or Amishes, say) was obviously because a society so preoccupied with vagaries of sexual conduct was bound to be fascinated by the notion of more or less civilised white contemporaries openly and legally practising polygamy.

Save for this one prurient particular, the French public had no knowledge of or interest in Mormon doctrine. Yet it so happens that polygamy was not an issue in what was quite the most curious comedy about Mormons: Philippe Gille's Camille. This one-act comedy was interesting in the first place because it was staged at the Comédie-Française (on 12 March 1890), even though it seems much better suited by its fantastic plot to the Palais-royal, Vaudeville or Variétés at best.

Otherwise, its interest lay in its assumptions about Mormon practices. The dénouement depended entirely on the premise that Mormons could do pretty much as they pleased in

matters of sex and marriage, so that the heroine was able to change her sex - at least legally - and to get married as a man. It was a very bizarre fantasy, and although not a great success,<sup>29</sup> it did well enough to suggest that French audiences were prepared to believe anything about beings as exotic as Mormons.

This could in fact be said of Americans in general as they were depicted in French comedy during these decades.

Maurice Baudin observed that

Tandis que la littérature se faisait réaliste et documentaire sur tout autre sujet, elle réservait l'Oncle Sam pour le premier rôle de sa dernière fantaisie.<sup>30</sup>

It was probably personal sensitivity which made Baudin feel the American was travestied to an especial degree, as other types were depicted just as fantastically; but it does seem valid to conclude that a deep and general ignorance about the United States and its people allowed them to be comically distorted by French playwrights untrammelled by considerations of fact.

#### 4. East Europeans

Though their homelands were relatively remote, East Europeans were fairly common, and in some cases regular, visitors to Paris, so it was quite natural that the comic theatre of the period should find a place for a handful of Poles (though these seem to have been seen as subjects for drama and pathos more often than for comedy), together with a sprinkling of assorted aristocratic Serbs, Hungarians and Wallachians - adventurers almost to a man.<sup>31</sup>

The most important, of course, were the Russians. Russians were quite a familiar part of Parisian society at this time. A

number of families were more or less domiciled in France, and their numbers were periodically augmented by visitors of various kinds, from what were known as the Boyards, high-born men on a spree, to the families that regularly visited Paris in the course of a seasonal migration that took them from their country estates to Moscow, to Vienna, to Paris, to Cannes.

Russia also held a special place in French thinking because of the long-standing political ideal of security for France through close ties with Russia. Beginning not long after the Crimean War, reinforced by France's defeat by Prussia, crowned by the alliance of 1894, and lingering on until the First World War and October Revolution, the idea of mutual support between the two countries was cherished by successive governments and by the general public in France.

It was largely on this account that Russia was the least unpopular of foreign nations in France, and the genuineness of the sentiment was incontrovertibly attested by the huge loans made to Russia in the Eighties and Nineties:

La coqueluche de l'opinion publique, des années durant, ce sera le Russe. Les rentiers, les braves gens, les petits épargnants lui donneront leur argent... même s'il est plutôt mangeur de savonnette et de suif. La magnificence des princes - russes - séduit le pignouf. On ne prête qu'aux riches.<sup>32</sup>

As Jean-Claude Simoën's ironical words imply, the Russian image in France incorporated some curious myths, and the unrivalled extravagance and wildness of the Russian rakehells who came to revel in the pleasures of Paris only added to the impression of an extremely alien race, brutal and barbaric in some ways, yet highly sophisticated and polished in others.

Perhaps one of the most revealing insights into how Russians were thought of was given by Meilhac and Halévy in

Le Reveillon (1872), especially the end of Act II scene ii. Gaillardin, waiting to make the acquaintance of his Russian host, was plainly expecting a hirsute giant:

Duparquet (riant) - Six pieds!... des moustaches formidables!... Ah ça! de qui parlez-vous?

Gaillardin - Eh, pardieu! de votre prince russe... du prince Yermontoff!

(Entre par la gauche Yermontoff; - dix-huit ans, figure d'enfant fatigué...)<sup>33</sup>

Just as interesting as Gaillardin's preconception was Meilhac and Halévy's idea of a Russian as urbane, over-sophisticated and world-weary at eighteen. It will be noted that Yermontoff was a striking exception to the general rule, mentioned above, that foreigners were depicted as more forceful and vital than the French characters surrounding them.

Prince Wolinzoff, who made a brief appearance in the same authors' comedy Le Prince four years later, was shown to be on suspiciously familiar terms with Parisian actresses, but he too was a gentleman, courteous, affable and (at least figuratively) bon prince.

True to real life, high-born Russians like these were depicted as speaking French fluently and correctly, with no more than an "accent russe très léger". In fact Meilhac and Halévy did not show them as the least ridiculous in any respect whatever.

## 5. Latin Americans

The forerunner of the Latin Americans so gleefully exploited by Labiche and Feydeau was the Brazilian of the Sixties. Brazil had impinged on the French consciousness as a result of simultaneous commercial booms in rubber and coffee, beginning around 1850 and continuing beyond the end of the

century. Brazil was apparently conceived of in France as a land of sudden and immense fortunes, of rough and ready up-country ways, and of imperious Latin passions inflamed by the tropical sun.

By 1863, the date of Meilhac and Halévy's comedy Le Brésilien, the characteristic lineaments of the stage stereotype were already solidly established, to the point of being recognized as a stereotype. A Brazilian, it was understood, was one in whom insolent wealth was allied with a comic accent and a propensity to prompt and very violent jealousy. So for Blancpartout, by his own account "une nature corrompue et brillante", a Brazilian was the epitome of that element of unpredictable risk which the languid Parisian needed to give a love-affair its spice: "Ce qu'il me faut à moi, c'est le danger, c'est le combat! c'est le Brésilien qui soupçonne, qui hurle et qui bondit!" (iv) His needs were deliciously met by the aspiring actor Greluche who, although he had never personally played des rôles de Brésilien, had a perfect grasp of the convention. Smashing one vase and menacing another, he observed sotto voce: "Il veut du Brésilien!... il en aura!..." (xiii), before bounding in pursuit of the thrilled Blancpartout, bellowing bloodthirsty menaces.

The Brazilian elaborated in the Sixties plainly functioned rather like the Labichean soldier, as the type of anti-bourgeois: extravagantly behaved, outspoken and recklessly violent. The same characteristics, together with the picturesque political traditions of their various real or imaginary homelands, were the basis for the strong appeal which Latin Americans had for certain comic playwrights of the Third Republic.

Feydeau's first play, Par la fenêtre, created 1 June 1882,<sup>35</sup> contained a classic Brazilian; or rather it alluded to one, for the terrible Alcibiade never actually appeared in the play. It was nevertheless on his violent jealousy that the action turned, since his wife Emma, as passionate and headstrong as he, resolved to teach him a lesson and, in the peremptorily selfish way of foreigners, enrolled the reluctant but feeble Hector to serve her vengeance.

Also miserably enbroiled in another's exigent conception of revenge was Ferdinand Martin, meek anti-hero of Augier and Labiche's comedy Le Prix Martin of 1876, incited by his fiery Guatemalan cousin Hernandez Martinez to wreak mortal vengeance on Mme Martin's lover.

The idea of violent retribution was to remain one of the essential traits of stage Latin Americans, but some four years previously the scope of the stereotype had been broadened by Labiche and Duru in Doit-on le dire? With Inès Fuentès de Papaguanos, marquis and commodore of the Republic of Mosquitos, Labiche had created a memorable character and also tapped the promising comic vein of the "Banana Republic".

The traditional Brazilian had been wealthy and hence powerful, if only for the moment.<sup>36</sup> Papaguanos and his descendants often bore impressive titles, held high office in their country, and conducted themselves with appropriate arrogance; but the states they came from were usually insignificant and beggarly, and they themselves often proved penurious pícaros, ruined by gambling, or supplementing their income by peddling decorations. The contrast between their pretensions to consequence and the shabby reality had definite comic potential. If General Irrigua, as Lorcey has affirmed,

was based on a real South American general who misappropriated official funds for riotous living, many of the audience of Un fil à la patte must have recognized the allusion with especial glee.

French audiences must also have taken particular pleasure in the colourful political life of Latin America, which allowed them to laugh at governments even more ephemeral than those of the Third Republic. This source of humour was widely used but was probably exploited best by Gandillot in La Tournée Ernestin of 1892. In this vaudeville, the star of a French theatrical troupe was elevated by a revolution to the presidency of a small South American state. Ousted by a counter-revolution the next day, he was forced to apply for assistance to the nearest consul, a Belgian bar-keeper, presenting himself grandly as ex-President of Santa-Baccara, to which the Belgian replied simply that he was, too.

Latin Americans were perceived as essentially comic, therefore, on a number of counts: for their volcanic temperament, just like that of the grotesque "Palais-Royal American"; for their speech, in which florid hispanic rhetoric was comically set off by distorted French; and for their laughable solemnity about their own pinchbeck importance and that of the ridiculous little states from which they came.

As was shown above, as early as Le Brésilien, the convention of the fiery Latin was well enough entrenched to be self-referring. By 1888, the stereotype was so universally recognized as a stereotype that Meilhac and Ganderax were able to obtain a sophisticated comic effect by depicting Ramiro Vasquez, in Pepa, as a South American constantly on his guard against behaving like a comic-opera rastaquouère.



Foreigners: Footnotes

1. Zola, "Nos auteurs dramatiques", Oeuvres complètes, 11, 647.
2. F.A. Taylor, The Theatre of Alexandre Dumas fils, 154-55.
3. Parigot for one plainly shared the preoccupation which he thought ran throughout Dumas's work: "Oui, il paraît bien que, dès le début de sa carrière, ou à peu près, M. Dumas a distingué nettement le danger qu'apportent avec elles ces femmes qui n'ont ni patrie, ni foyer, libres partout, à grandes allures et d'une indépendance exaspérée, qui s'abattent sur les capitales toujours trop petites pour leur fièvre de mouvement et leur rage de domination." (Parigot, 178)
4. Ibid. Elsewhere (page 248) he returned to the same theme in greater detail and purpler rhetoric.
5. J.J. Weiss in Le Figaro, 2 April 1881.
6. Zola in Le Voltaire, 24 December 1878.
7. Baker, 99. Cf. Haffter, 57, Note 15.
8. Notably in Le Prix Martin, Par la fenêtre, Le Dindon.
9. The operetta maintained a certain fondness for Tyroleans, though, as a pretext for yodelling and tyroliennes: Les Tyroliens de contrebande, La Timbale d'argent, Les Tyroliens de Pontoise, Tyrolienne et clarinette, Les Tyroliens de l'Eldorado, etc., as well as Grangé and Bernard's vaudeville Fleur de Tyrol of 1872. It might be noted that the lyric stage was more interested in the exotic in general, no doubt because of the opportunities offered for picturesque sets and costumes and musical novelty numbers.
10. Even a writer as original as Jarry resorted to these traditional effects in Jef.
11. Cf. "Oh! Sir Arthur Cornett, ô richissime américain!" (Feydeau, La Lycéenne, III, i)
12. E.g. Lopez, Les Ricochets du divorce, II, i and Feydeau, Le Dindon, I, xiv.
13. Parigot, 246-47.
14. E.g. Eva Blounth in Rabagas, 1872; Sarah Tapplebot in L'Oncle Sam, 1873; Diana in Blackson père et fille, 1877; Georgina in Les Ricochets du divorce, 1879; Leah Henderson in Daniel Rochat, 1880; Lucy Watson in Le Monde où l'on s'ennuie, 1881; Edith Murphy in Camille, 1890; Miss Kate in L'Argent d'autrui, 1893; Maggy Soldignac in Le Dindon, 1896; Betty Hogson in L'Anglais tel qu'on le parle, 1899. On the other side, there were a few, but only a few, successful Anglo-Saxon suitors for Frenchwomen, like Jonathan Carpett in Jonathan, 1879.

In a climate of opinion which tended to think of women as "prizes" to be "won", national self-esteem may have been involved.

15. "British" and "English" were virtually synonymous. The Scots specifically identified as such were too few to justify generalization, but appear to have fallen into two categories: the traditional dour miser and the sympathetic laird, perhaps a mark of respect for Ossian and Scott.
16. "L'ennemi principal, pas de doute, c'est l'Allemand. (...) Cependant, et pour encore moins de 'raisons objectives', la plupart des Français voient un ennemi autrement plus efficace, parce que plus insidieux, dans la 'perfide Angleterre'. Tout événement affectant l'immense Empire britannique - il est rival du nôtre - est commenté avec une agressivité, une hargne, qui nous étonnent encore." (Simoën, 178)
17. Anglophobia was so general that this offered an easy way to establish a reputation for paradoxical originality. Cf. Chastenet, Histoire de la III<sup>e</sup> République, 3, 27.
18. Tradition has it that these lines were added at the insistence of Emilie Broisat, who played Lucy.
19. Manuel Esteban has noted that Maggy Soldignac, for instance, had an "ardent temperament, not usually associated with the English". (Esteban, 117)
20. Presumably these particular states were chosen for their quaint names. Similarly, Alfred Duru's Berthelin chez les Mormonnes (1875) was a "fantaisie massachusettienne en un acte."
21. The virgin forest (perhaps a reminiscence of Chateaubriand?) was a favourite touch of local colour. Nathan, cajoling his ex-wife Christine in Poujol and Jouhaud's operetta Divorcez! (1882), pleaded: "Souviens-toi de ton premier amour qui s'est révélé dans une de nos forêts vierges." (xi)
22. Baudin, "L'Américain dans le théâtre français", 80.
23. E.g. Sam Tapplebot in L'Oncle Sam; William Carpett and his late uncle Gordon in Gondinet, Oswald and Giffard's Jonathan (1879); Blackson in Delavigne and Normand's Blackson père et fille (1877). Shaw, in Hermant's Les Transatlantiques (1898) was a more sympathetic variant.
24. E.g. Diana Blackson; Miss Kate in Hennique's L'Argent d'autrui (1893); but above all Sarah Tapplebot, though as Albert Dubeux wrote (with apparently unconscious humour), having fallen really in love with her marquis, Sarah "se transforme alors en une pure jeune fille ivre de désintéressement." (Julia Bartet, 29-30). See also Baudin, "L'Américaine au théâtre".

25. Dubeux aptly noted "L'Oncle Sam est un pamphlet en action contre les Etats-Unis." (op. cit., 29) Its intention was obviously to combat American influence in France. In a letter to a friend cited by Mouly, Sardou wrote of the play's reception: "Je vois tout ce monde si effroyablement avachi, corrompu et démoralisé et cette Amérique que j'attaque nous a si bien envahis que j'ai très peur d'être vaincu dans la lutte que j'engage." (Les Papiers de Victorien Sardou, 345)
26. Zola in Le Bien public, 7 August 1876.
27. Cf. Christine's assertion: "Presque tous les Américains portent un revolver dont ils se servent dans l'occasion." (Divorcez!, scene vi)
28. Compare, for example, Zola's description with Muserolle's comment on the furiously jealous Papaguanos: "Il est cousu de revolvers, ce vieux trappeur!" (Doit-on le dire?, III, xi)
29. 19 performances in 1890, 9 in 1891, 4 in 1892, 3 in 1893, 3 in 1894.
30. Baudin, "L'Américain dans le théâtre français", 75.
31. Not to mention imaginary nationalities, like the Silistriens of Donnay's Education de Prince, etc.
32. Simoën, 178.
33. In the original production, Yermontoff was played by Georgette Olivier.
34. Probably influenced by Montès de Montejanos in Balzac's La Cousine Bette (1846).
35. See above.
36. The Brazilian in Meilhac and Halévy's La Vie parisienne (I, xi) was on his third visit to Paris, having already squandered two fortunes there.

JEWS

The idea of a "Jewish problem" and a consequent anti-Semitism were important and effectively new features of life in France at this time. Although there had been a certain amount of feeling against Jews since medieval times in France, their status there had generally been better than in most European countries; but from about 1880 a number of factors concurred to undermine the measure of acceptance French Jews had hitherto enjoyed.<sup>1</sup> Among them were:

- 1) The pogroms of 1881-82 in Russia and Eastern Europe, which brought some 8,000 Yiddiches, a new kind of Jew, very "visible" and "alien", who changed the perceived image of Jews.
- 2) Conversely the 15,000 Ashkenazim who had immigrated from Alsace and Lorraine after their annexation had achieved an all too successful adaptation and socio-economic upward mobility which aroused suspicion and envy.
- 3) The growing notion of a general French "decadence" which emerged after the war, and which some sought to explain by casting the Jews as scapegoats.
- 4) A series of sensational financial disasters and political scandals in which several of those implicated were Jewish.

According to their class, political or religious affiliations, non-Jews held very different, even contradictory images of Jews; but under virtually all his aspects, le Juif-Protée (as Michel Winock aptly described him) was disliked or despised by some section of French society (one cannot even specify "gentile society"), accused of everything from ritual murder and espionage to constituting a health hazard. Then what had been a variety of disparate prejudices became focussed

as a significant, organized social and political force, largely through the work of Edouard Drumont, who published La France juive in 1886, founded the Ligue antisémite in 1889, and launched his Jew-baiting newspaper La Libre Parole in 1892<sup>2</sup>.

Given, then, that there was such acute consciousness of Jews in society at the time, it is really quite surprising that they did not appear more often as characters in drama before 1900. Perhaps commercial prudence counselled playwrights and managers against such a divisive subject; certainly one or two anti-Semitic plays were blocked by the censor.

The standard studies of the question - Abraham Dreyfus' 1886 lecture, René de Chavannes's articles in the Mercure de France in 1910 (actually a very close paraphrase indeed of Dreyfus) and Maurice Bloch's 1892 lecture on the Jewess in literature - were agreed that the traditional depiction of Jews on stage was almost entirely governed by convention: "Il est convenu qu'un juif, au théâtre, doit toujours être grotesque",<sup>3</sup> unless he was hard, materialistic and sinister. In either case, he was middle-aged or older, vulgar and repellent. Jewish women, on the other hand, were invariably young and dangerously beautiful, a variety of the exotic femme fatale.<sup>4</sup>

It is of course true that a large number of dramatists were themselves Jewish or of Jewish extraction<sup>5</sup>: Bernard, Bernstein, Blum, Busnach, Cohen, Crémieux, Dennery, Dreyfus, Halévy, Mendès, Nozière, Porto-Riche, Savoir, and so on; but they had little effect on the stage image of Jews. Most avoided Jewish characters, feeling like Dennery that they did not want to perpetuate the stereotypes but that audiences

would accept nothing else. Occasionally, a Jewish playwright would create a stock Jew. In Bernstein's Le Marché, there was some satire of anti-Jewish prejudice:

- Alors, to crois vraiment que c'est avec lui... avec ce sale juif?...
- Il n'est pas sale!
- C'est une façon de Parler... On dit toujours ça d'un juif. (I, i)

Yet in the end, the converted Jew Simonein turned out to be a pretty typical stage Jew - slippery, unreliable, ruthless and an avid social climber.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most interesting features of how Jews were perceived was the widespread assumption that there was a vengeful, threatening undercurrent in their attitude towards gentiles. It seems to have been presumed that because of the treatment they had received Jews would be bound to feel like striking back, given the chance. This note was sounded in the open letter to Cuvillier-Fleury prefaced to La Femme de Claude, in Dumas's description of world Jewry as "Ces persécutés conquérants, en marche à cette heure pour acheter le monde."<sup>7</sup>

Wariness could be heard again in a conversation between the Prince d'Aurec and his wife in which both were obviously trying to be just and moderate about the Jews:

- J'estime que ce sont des gens très bien qui nous atteignent aisément, nous autres chrétiens...
- ...Et qui nous dépassent quelquefois.
- Mais mon avis est qu'il ne faut pas leur donner barre sur soi. (I, viii)

Horn's behaviour in that play, and Simonein's in Le Marché, seemed to confirm that, like Shylock, a Jew would indeed ruthlessly press home any advantage he held over a gentile.

The ironical thing is that it is very hard to find any

historical basis for the watchful rancour attributed to Jews as Jews. As a community, French Jews at this time were so studiously passive and conciliatory that so far from counter-attacking when opportunity offered, they could rarely be prevailed upon even to defend themselves. "Least said, soonest mended" was their watchword.

In spite of this, Jews with money, that is to say with power, were more sinister than comic on stage; and most were associated with money, from rich financiers like Baron Gugenfeld, Baron de Horn and Simonein down to smaller-scale usurers like Kolbus in Cottens and Gavault's Fin de rêve. Most sinister of all, though abstract and unseen, was the Jewish bank which smashed the Banque Catholique in Hennique's L'Argent d'autrui.

A striking exception to the rule was the whimsically-named Esther de Nucingen in Meilhac's Brevet supérieur, who though extremely wealthy was kind and generous enough to facilitate the marriage of her friend, a humble gentile girl, to the count they both loved.

Most sympathetically drawn Jews were not particularly rich, however. A professor of philosophy, Fernand Hecht, was the raisonneur-hero of Lucien Besnard's La Fronde. His ironical manner was shown to be merely a mask to protect a deep sensitivity. Though he was not allowed to marry the gentile girl he loved in silence, the audience was encouraged to feel sympathy for their plight, like that which Dumas invited for the impossible love between Claude and Rebecca in La Femme de Claude.<sup>8</sup>

Quite the most sympathetic and engaging Jew on the comic stage was the match-making rabbi, David Sichel, in the stage

version of Erckmann-Chatrrian's L'Ami Fritz, which the excellent actor Got made one of his finest creations.

Erckmann-Chatrrian can probably be accounted philo-Semitic,<sup>9</sup> but this was uncommon. On balance, Jews were still depicted negatively on the stage. Much more representative was a play like La Dernière croisade, a comedy by "Maxime Gray", which was probably quite offensive to a Jewish spectator. What was so insulting was not that Baron Gugenfeld was another stock juif blasonné, a rich, cynical, unprincipled opportunist, nor that his wife was having an affair with a gentile, the Marquis de Maltaux, nor even that the play ended with their conversion. It was the underlying innuendo that even Jewish piety was shallow and negotiable, as implied by the fact that Sarah, whose devout orthodoxy had been expressly established in the first act, was shown so ready to apostasize for the love of a titled goy and a ham sandwich.

It must be acknowledged, nevertheless, that even at its most caustically satirical, the comic theatre was relatively mild in its depiction of Jews, and one could hardly deduce from it the depth of anti-Jewish feeling in certain sections of society which is revealed by some of the vituperative journalism of the period.<sup>10</sup>



Jews: Footnotes

1. For the historical background, see Bourdrel, Histoire des juifs de France; Hyman, From Dreyfus to Vichy; Wilson, Ideology and Experience; Winock, Edouard Drumont & Cie.
2. See in particular Wilson, 170-71, and Winock. Drumont was incidentally himself co-author of a one-act comedy, Je déjeune à midi, produced at the Gymnase on 5 August 1875 (not 1874, as Wilson stated). His collaborator was one Aimé Dollfuss. Wilson (399) hints that his animus against the theatre was that of a jealous would-be dramatist.
3. Dumas fils, Théâtre complet, 5 (Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1898), 214.
4. See Dreyfus, 10; Sartre, Réflexions sur la question juive, 58-9; Wilson, 590. In The Romantic Agony, Mario Praz does not appear to have seen la Belle Juive as a distinct category of femme fatale.
5. In fact, the number of Jewish playwrights was out of all proportion to the percentage of Jews in the population - about 0.2% by the turn of the century, according to Bourdrel (194). The same over-representation applied to theatre-managers, actors, drama critics, and quite probably theatre-goers. However, for that matter a similar imbalance obtained among university professors, doctors and so on - even, ironically, army officers.
6. Nozière (born Weyl) and Savoir (ex-Poznansky) together wrote Le Baptême (1907), cited by Wilson (605) as an anti-Semitic play.
7. Dumas, op. cit., 215, where we also note: "Je crains fort que ce ne soit le Dieu des juifs qui ait eu raison lorsqu'il a promis à ses enfants le royaume de la terre, et je commence à croire que ceux-ci ne nous laisseront bientôt plus que le ciel, dont ils se soucient médiocrement." A recent article by Sidney D. Braun, attempting to show Dumas as a champion of the Jewish cause, seemed to make selective use of the evidence, which may point rather to a most curious ambivalence in Dumas's attitude towards the Jews.
8. Inspired perhaps by her namesake in Ivanhoe, Rebecca represented the "Good Jewess" sub-type, described by Wilson 590-91.
9. On the strength of this work and Le Blocus, and perhaps Le Juif polonais. Wilson's inclusion of the last-named among French plays of the late nineteenth century which "presented stereotypes of the Jew, mainly hostile" (605) appears misleading.
10. Wilson concluded that "Anti-semitism in nineteenth-century France was embedded in the culture (...). This is evident, for example, in the literature of the period, and, more significantly, in the theatre, a more popular and direct

medium." (loc. cit.) This view bore on the theatre as a whole, however, including revivals of The Merchant of Venice and Le Juif errant, as well as serious new works like Israël, Manette Salomon, Le Retour de Jérusalem, Décadence and Le Baptême. Comic works of an anti-Semitic tendency would appear to have been less numerous and less vehement.

## CONCLUSION

Après avoir été placée au centre de la vie artistique à l'époque classique, après avoir été considérée sous sa forme extrême du grotesque, comme un ingrédient indispensable du drame romantique, la comédie cessa, autour de 1850 environ, de participer à la littérature,<sup>1</sup>

wrote Pierre Haffter in 1972. If this represents a fairly typical modern view, then it might be argued that one of the many features of interest presented by the French comic theatre between 1870 and 1900 was precisely that there were signs of the breach between literature and stage being mended, by authors such as Becque, Renard, Rostand even, and some would say Courteline.

For all that, the playwrights studied above were not offered as a pantheon of first-class literary artists, since this was not the criterion for their inclusion. Rather, the author's standpoint has been that described by Félix Gaiffe in the foreword to Le Rire et la scène française:

Bien convaincu que tout ce qui touche à la scène a un caractère social autant qu'esthétique et doit être étudié par d'autres méthodes que l'histoire littéraire pure et simple, je crois servir la cause de la vérité en considérant des faits collectifs comme tels et en n'excluant pas de mon examen les oeuvres médiocres, dès qu'elles paraissent significatives.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the author has accepted Maurice Descotes's contention that the mediocre (or what we take to be so) is in some respects particularly instructive:

En fait, si l'on veut saisir vraiment les réactions du grand public, on se retrouve ramené à une seule méthode: l'étude des grands succès de l'histoire du théâtre, manifestations d'un engouement général qui abolit les jugements purement individuels, expression d'une véritable âme collective. Et cette étude sera beaucoup plus significative et probante encore si elle s'applique à ce que l'on peut appeler les

faux grands succès, les succès que n'a pas confirmés la postérité. (...)

Les faux chefs-d'oeuvre sont beaucoup plus aisés à manier car, dans leur succès, s'étale à découvert le goût de l'époque.<sup>3</sup>

Gaiffe's classic study of 1931 embraced the whole of French comic drama "depuis le Jeu d'Adam, jusqu'à Topaze". This present enquiry has considered only thirty years of theatrical life in France (in correspondingly greater detail). Despite the great difference in scale, it will be obvious to the reader that the general intention is the same, and so are most of the underlying assumptions, most notably the principle that Gaiffe expressed in the formula "Dis-moi de quoi tu ris, et je te dirai qui tu es."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the hypothesis is that something useful can be inferred about the social and cultural attitudes of the theatre-going classes from the success of the various ways in which theatres and playwrights tried to amuse them.

As far as the period in question is concerned, it would seem that the established sorts of comedy still retained much of their appeal for the public, but that also there were, in a manner of speaking, both some substantially new jokes and some new ways of telling a joke; and quite a number of these have remained current.

For the sake of convenience, the new trends will be summarized under three separate heads: changes in how theatres functioned, changes in play-making and changes in the nature of humour itself.

#### 1. New Kinds of Theatre

The period 1870-1900 was one of great and lasting changes in the French theatre, significantly extending the scope

of what the stage could do. The most important innovations were in organization and in staging.

The crucial development in theatrical organization was the Théâtre-Libre experiment. At a time when the French theatre was thoroughly industrialized, it provided a model for companies which could address minority publics, and hence for an experimental, avant-garde theatre. Even more than its repertorial policies or its stagecraft, it was the way that the Théâtre-Libre reconciled professional levels of achievement with freedom from commercialism that inspired the "independent theatre" movement which spread so quickly throughout Europe after 1887.

The Théâtre-Libre also played a leading role in the reform, almost amounting to a revolution, in how French companies actually presented their plays, and the related emergence of a new kind of theatre professional: the metteur en scène. As Norman Marshall, Denis Bablet, Edward Braun and others have shown, the producer or director is a relatively recent figure in the French theatre. Even in 1870, plays were often still produced in an ad hoc or even piecemeal fashion that we may find hard to visualize.

At the Comédie-Française, for instance, the practice for many years was that whoever happened to be semainier conducted rehearsals during his tour of duty. This apparently haphazard method worked quite well for Conservatoire-trained actors playing the repertoire. The sense of tradition was very strong at both Conservatoire and Théâtre-Français, and much of the interpretation of the classics was handed down from one generation to the next, as ballet choreographies used to be. To this day, traditional bits of business survive

which are supposed to have been used by Molière.

When the play was a new creation, it might be produced by the administrateur-général or else by one of the sociétaires. Often it did not matter greatly who the nominal director was: experienced actors, specialized in a single emploi, expected to "direct" themselves to a large extent, guided by convention and precedent and normally the author would be present, pressing for the effects and jeux de scène he wanted.

In the commercial theatre, there were a number of actor-managers, like Sarah Bernhardt and Coquelin, who produced the plays in which they starred. Otherwise, the directeur was often metteur en scène, and many had considerable talent for the task: Montigny, Porel, Albert Carré, Samuel and of course Antoine. Towards the end of the century, the functions of directeur and of directeur de scène were sometimes separated. This was tried at the Odéon in 1896, for instance, in a vain attempt to make the Antoine/Ginisty administration work; and when Antoine resigned, he was replaced as directeur de scène by Georges Bourdon, from the Escholiers.

Once again, the playwright often had a hand in the production and some had considerable scenic flair. Sardou was an excellent director, somewhat in the Montigny style, and though it is not generally realized he occasionally directed other dramatists' work. Feydeau directed his own work brilliantly, as did Rostand. A very common arrangement was for production to be shared by the manager and the playwright, sometimes assisted by the stage-manager.

It has sometimes been said that Antoine invented the

French metteur en scène, but Marvin Carlson and Svend Erichsen have argued cogently that the first French director, in the modern sense, was Montigny, who in 1844 took over the Gymnase, the theatre of Scribe, and instituted a new way of staging plays there.<sup>5</sup>

The classic, "vaudeville" staging of the Scribean era had been very stylized: furniture was disposed around the perimeter of the set and almost all action took place on the forestage. Montigny, though, liked to interdict the traditional declaiming spot behind the prompt box by placing some large object like a table there. His actors had to negotiate furniture set out more as it would be in the real world, which resulted in more complex, curved and visually interesting moves. Often now actors delivered their lines seated, if need be drawing up a chair, and so altering the configuration of the setting.

Montigny made other significant reforms, notably in set-dressing and in the shaping of his actors' performances, directed towards greater unity and a more lifelike effect. The nett result was a trend away from stylized convention towards a mixed aesthetic mode, a sort of modified realism well suited to the semi-realistic dramatic styles of Augier and Dumas fils. The Montigny manner gradually spread in varying degrees to other theatres - the Vaudeville, the Odéon and the Comédie-Française itself - constituting the norm against which the avant-garde reacted.

In fact Antoine moved in the same general direction as Montigny, only his realism was more radical and unity was facilitated by giving still more importance to the director. He established a clear, strict hierarchy among those involved

in the creation of a play. The director was in principle the servant - not the collaborator - of the playwright (whether alive or dead); but he was the absolute master of the actor. It was the director who took the final interpretive responsibility for the production: the actor's role was purely that of an executant, as he made very plain in his famous open letter to Le Bargy in 1893.<sup>6</sup> Antoine's view of the actor would be taken to extreme lengths by avant-garde figures like Jarry, Craig and Meyerhold; but it might be noted that it also corresponded closely to the way Feydeau saw the actor's relation to the play.

Antoine had a holistic conception of the director's function, envisaging an all-embracing attention to every aspect of what he termed the "internal" as well as the "external" mise en scène. His criticism of Carré (considered one of the best Boulevard directors) was that his ideas on production hardly extended beyond the setting. René Peter recalled: "Je l'entends encore me disant que l'on confondait trop souvent la simple décoration avec la mise en scène proprement dite."<sup>7</sup>

Elizabeth Burns has suggested that the emergence of the modern director was closely related to the steady swing to realism which was taking place in the theatre:

The appearance of producers as independent professionals towards the end of the nineteenth century also helped dramatists and actors to define the play-world in realistic terms, to fake reality with conviction. Watching the stage from the front and designing the movements and spatial relations of the actors, the producer was able to appreciate the spectator's view of the play in a way that the actor-manager as a member of the cast could not. (...) Those like Antoine, Stanislavski and Vakhtangov, who wanted the play to approximate to real life, paid conscientious attention to every physical detail of scene and setting. The scene as a whole was always given



an audience reference rather than an actor's reference.<sup>8</sup>

However, though an illusionist production was carefully arranged for an audience in this respect, it was no longer played to an audience in the old way. Antoine and his realist successors aimed to act on the spectator rather than to interact with him. It may be true that the audience's role in the previous theatre had also been mainly passive; but asides shared with the public, tirades à effet directed over the footlights, and closing compliments or sollicitations for applause (like those in Banville or in Le Réveillon) were so many bridges between the real and the fictive worlds.<sup>9</sup> The realist "fourth wall" separated instead of linking the play and its public. Both literally and figuratively, the old-style actor looked outwards, towards the audience; the Théâtre-Libre actors looked to each other. It was as if the play was a closed system, the theatre a peep-show, and the spectator an invisible and external voyeur.

This would have far-reaching implications for the theatre in general, but its effects ought to be particularly marked in comedy if Albert Cook was right, or partly right, in his contention:

In tragedy the players on the stage are as objective to the spectators as if they were in a book. But comedy always violates this convention: the actor reaches out of the frame of objectivity and addresses the audience second-personally.<sup>10</sup>

The other main avant-garde tendency, Symbolism, did aim at a form of audience participation, but significantly different from the traditional one. Because the Symbolist theatre was elitist, it did not expect to involve the whole of the theatre-going public, just "the happy few". Further-

more, the participation that it did offer was an essentially individual bilateral relation to the work, not the collective response of a public in the old sense.<sup>11</sup>

The commercial principle that "the customer is always right" had been the basic premiss both of the pièce bien faite and of the way that theatres operated in Scribe's day. When the avant-garde ceased to defer to them as privileged patrons, playgoers lost something of the sense of unquestioned supremacy and control over the theatrical experience they had formerly enjoyed, and they were no longer "at home" in the theatre in quite the same old comfortable way.

## 2. New Kinds of Dramaturgy

The changes in the theatre during this period were closely bound up with far-reaching new developments in dramaturgy. These years witnessed serious challenges to the entrenched hegemony of the well-made play in France. That method of play-making and the assumptions about the theatre it represented might remain the norm for the older, established dramatic critics - Sarcey, Weiss and company - but the ideal of the pièce bien faite was increasingly called into question by dramatists, some in open revolt, others more subtly subversive.

The idea that the only valid structure for a play was the "Aristotelian" one built around a linear plot was quietly undermined by the looser, epic plot structures occasionally employed by Gondinet and by Meilhac and Halévy. The latter also sometimes followed the received dramatic recipe in a burlesque spirit which made their use of it an ironical critique rather than an endorsement. Becque's Les Corbeaux, too, turned out to be an implicit indictment of the dramatic

form he used, though in this case involuntarily. Such lapses from orthodoxy were apparently slight and innocuous, but really tended to the same general end as the more radical rebellion of the Naturalists and other avant-garde heretics of the Eighties and Nineties.

The reduction of the importance of plot in drama probably had a bearing on the renewed interest in short plays shown by fin-de-siècle playwrights. Achieving structural unity in a five-act play not organized around a solid armature of plot could be difficult, but the problem was much less for a one-act play. Indeed, in very short pieces (Courteline's La Cinquantaine and M. Badin, Tristan Bernard's Franches lippées and Le Vrai courage) there might be no real story, just a situation.

The public's readiness to forego the familiar pièce bien faite could perhaps be set down to their natural and spontaneous weariness with its outworn tricks, which is what Gaiffe seemed to be implying when he wrote: "Le public commence à se fatiguer des préparations trop visibles et des péripéties dont on lui a déjà présenté vingt exemplaires du même modèle";<sup>12</sup> but it is tempting to suppose that their expectations had been conditioned by the avant-garde theatre, and to say with Pascal Pia: "Par une sort d'endosmose, Antoine a, peu à peu, rendu proprement insupportables à tous les fameuses conventions chères à Sarcey."<sup>13</sup>

Whatever the reason, certain publics at least were coming to accept that telling a story was only one of several purposes that a play might properly serve. Another option was to sketch a virtually static tableau of some corner of society as, in their very different ways, Gondinet did in the

second acts of Le Club and Un Parisien, and Méténier did in En famille, and Courteline did in Lidoire. With equal validity, a play, whether serious or comic, might attempt something analogous to Impressionist painting and aspire simply to capture a single, fugitive mood. Such could have been the intent of Renard's Le Pain de ménage and even that of Courteline's La Paix chez soi.

Thus the architectural qualities of a play came to be seen as less important than formerly. Certainly the amorphousness of certain avant-garde pieces was deliberate provocation; but many of Courteline's and Tristan Bernard's plays were very ill-made, by the criteria of Scribe and Sarcey, and yet proved theatrically viable.

The acceptability of the shorter play was associated too with the spread of the spectacle coupé, which lent the one-act form new prominence and consequence. Formerly, if a one-act play was not intended for a comédie de salon, its usual destiny was to be a lever de rideau. Some very successful one-act comedies had been written by Labiche, Meilhac and Halévy, Gondinet and others; but the status of the curtain-raiser (unless it were by Musset) was inevitably a subordinate one, even a sacrificial one in theatres where late arrival was habitual.

In a spectacle coupé, since the various items were of more or less coordinate importance, the short play was no longer an hors-d'oeuvre for something else. It could aspire to the artistic dignity the short story had achieved in the hands of a Maupassant. So where once the specialist in one-act plays had been a Verconsin, a Ferrier, or a Feuillet at best, it now became feasible to earn a serious reputation as

a dramatist on the strength of short pieces - provided that they were of the quality of Le Plaisir de rompre, Le Pain de ménage and Poil de Carotte.

It is true that Renard himself still felt an ambition - or perhaps an obligation - to show himself capable of the longer play; but the idea that it was a playwright's competence in large-scale works which gave his true measure, and that his one-act plays were merely the small change of his talent, was gradually losing some of its force.

The fortunes of other categories of drama were also changing during this period. The public continued to favour the lighter genres, especially the vaudeville and the operetta. For a while, indeed, it looked as though vaudeville itself were threatened by the popularity of operetta; but from the mid-Eighties, deprived of its best composers and librettists, the operetta was held to be dying, and not without reason, while there was a renaissance of the vaudeville, led in particular by Feydeau and his arch-rival Gandillot.

Vaudeville was also undergoing evolutionary change. The Scribean synthesis of the comédie-vaudeville was showing a tendency to separate once more into its constituent elements, but not along the original line of cleavage. The intricate plotting which had been taken from the comedy of intrigue remained attached to vaudeville, as practised by Hennequin, Feydeau, Gandillot and the new school of vaudevillistes. Now it was light comedy which tended to be rather loosely plotted, following the example set by Meilhac and Halévy and by Gondinet, perhaps once again with some encouragement from the avant-garde theatre, as Gaiffe suggested:

L'intrigue est beaucoup plus simple que dans l'ancienne comédie-vaudeville; les leçons du Théâtre-Libre n'ont pas été perdues.<sup>14</sup>

While vaudeville and light comedy were among the most flourishing genres towards the end of the century, others, like melodrama and the féerie, were falling into neglect, and in hindsight it is plain now that verse drama too was in reality still gradually declining. In spite of Faguet's astounding, rhapsodic Nunc dimittis in the Journal des Débats and Sarcey's vatic cry: "Voilà le joyeux soleil de la vieille Gaule qui, après une longue nuit, remonte à l'horizon", we can see that Cyrano de Bergerac was only a false dawn, after which the twilight continued to gather around the verse comedy.

Without wishing to detract in the least from Rostand's personal gifts as a dramatist, it might be suggested that the resurgence in popularity of verse drama during this period was basically a transient, post-war reaction. It was as if, in a moment of uncertainty and humiliation, French nostalgia for glory turned instinctively to the solace of the alexandrine, steeped as it was in associations with the Grand Siècle, in much the same way that it turned to the Napoleonic legend. It is certainly notable that several of the most successful verse dramas of the time were inspirational pieces with a heroic and patriotic flavour: Henri de Bornier's La Fille de Roland, Déroulède's Messire du Guesclin and La Mort de Hoche, Cyrano and L'Aiglon.<sup>15</sup>

What verse drama chiefly represented for the public of the day was escape from distasteful realities. It was an escape from present humiliations into a more consoling past, the great majority of verse plays being costume dramas. It

was equally an escape from a modern theatre which was perceived as increasingly given up to brutishness and cynicism, domestic and foreign. As one of its apologists saw it,

Le théâtre des poètes a noblement souligné la persistance de l'idéal. Il a été l'écho élargi de toutes les généreuses aspirations françaises.<sup>16</sup>

Because of its pretensions to lofty idealism, verse drama during this period was inclined to be solemn, so true verse comedies (as opposed to comédies-drames) were relatively few. Of those, a large proportion were fairly sedate, self-conscious à-propos commemorating the birthdays of the classic playwrights, or else Pierrot plays or pastiches of the traditional farce. The preoccupation with the past seems apt. Generally speaking, in the nostalgic attitudes it expressed and in its outmoded aesthetic ideals and dramatic technique, the verse play was already an anachronism when Banville died; and it is curious and instructive that it should have retained enough support from the public and from theatrical managements to eke out an existence until the end of the Belle Epoque.

We touch here on one of the most important characteristics of this period in the French theatre: its aesthetic pluralism. Instead of there being a dominant stylistic orthodoxy, or at most two competing styles, as there had been around 1830 and 1843, several simultaneous theatrical and dramaturgical options coexisted, in a way that appears to us quite "modern". In terms of comic drama, this meant that actors could still be found who could declaim verse and perform with the stylized swagger required by Cyrano de Bergerac, yet at the same time there were troupes who could give an appropriate account of Les Corbeaux, of La Dame de chez Maxim, of Le Pain de ménage and even of Ubu roi; and, even more

importantly, there were in varying degrees publics for each of these styles.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. A New Kind of Laughter?

When James K. Feibleman was surveying the western comic tradition in the opening chapter of his well-known study In Praise of Comedy, he despatched the comic theatre of the last century in France with the single, sagacious statement: "We get the distinct impression that the Frenchman of the nineteenth century laughed a great deal." Disappointing as it may be in some respects, this summary appraisal did at least highlight the important fact that the public was predisposed to laughter; and indeed, whatever reservations we may have now about the merits of most of it, comic drama would seem to have been the proper or characteristic idiom of the French stage around the turn of the century.<sup>18</sup>

Gaiffe drew attention to the eloquent fact that by about 1900 the comic had pervaded practically the whole of French drama, to some extent:

Parmi les pièces représentées de 1890 à 1914 on n'en trouverait peut-être pas trois, même chez les dramaturges les plus sérieux, qui n'admettent pas dans un sujet tragique la détente, au moins fugitive, d'un sourire.<sup>19</sup>

We may take it, then, that the comic mode was uniquely favoured in French drama around that time. What needs to be determined (and what Feibleman did not tell us) is whether the humour proposed by the theatre then was still substantially the same as it had been earlier in the century; for as Howarth has rightly pointed out: "One thing that appears to be certain about laughter in a theatrical context is that it is subject to the influence of fashion."<sup>20</sup>



Jules Lemaître once gave a good description of

la gaieté française dans les couches moyennes:  
un peu de blague très élémentaire et très grosse;  
pas mal de grivoiserie, - c'est le fond de  
l'esprit national, - et surtout une grande joie  
animale de vivre.<sup>21</sup>

As it happens, this analysis dates from as late as 1892, but the sense of humour delineated was clearly the same as that which had delighted in Duvert and Lauzanne, Henry Monnier and the early Labiche. Theirs was a variety of comedy which left the spectator's feelings of well-being, self-confidence and security intact, if not enhanced, because it was a joke among friends, the author subscribing to much the same basic values as his audience. The laughter was collective and solidary, a form of social communion.

Towards the mid-Sixties, though, a different note began to be heard in the sound of laughter. A certain hardness appeared, even in the comedy of the joyous Labiche. One of his greatest admirers, Soupault, was constrained to write of one of his best works, Le Point de mire (staged at the very peak of his career, in 1864):

Cette comédie est simplement révoltante.  
Révoltante par son sujet, révoltante par les  
caractères des personnages, révoltante par  
les répliques qu'échangent les hommes et les  
femmes, révoltante par les situations, par le  
cynisme de l'auteur, par l'éclairage cru des  
vérités. (...) Lorsqu'on lit Le Point de mire,  
on est frappé par l'extrême dureté des mots et  
le cynisme des répliques.<sup>22</sup>

Le Plus heureux des trois, written with Gondinet and staged on the eve of the war, also turned on an outrageously cynical thesis: that in a ménage à trois it is better to be the cuckold than the adulterer. Similarly, after the war, Doit-on le dire?, Vingt-neuf degrés à l'ombre and Le Prix Martin continued to undermine the corner-stone of French

nineteenth-century drama by their evident scepticism as to whether adultery was really the momentous matter it was supposed to be.<sup>23</sup>

Several commentators have found the post-war plays lacking in Labiche's former indulgent gaiety. Autrusseau felt they even had a harsh and embittered quality which made audiences uneasy:

Le public boude. En un temps où il a besoin d'être rasséréiné, et fait fête à un théâtre qui lui prête une noblesse et un courage totalement irréels, comment prendrait-il plaisir au déballage hargneux et ricanant de ses faiblesses?<sup>24</sup>

Even as Labiche's mellow comedy was turning sour, Meilhac and Halévy had been developing their own different strain of scepticism and irony, expressed as a very particular air of detachment, "qui n'est pas encore l'humeur morose, mais qui n'est déjà plus la belle humeur," as Parigot put it so excellently.<sup>25</sup> French comedy reached a crucial turning-point when "la belle humeur", the social expression of that "grande joie animale de vivre" Lemaître spoke of, began ebbing out of the work of some of its leading playwrights.

With authors like Augier, Barrière, Gondinet and the early Labiche, the spectator had enjoyed the secure feeling that his moral and social values were shared and respected. Comedy's fools and knaves, the Perrichons and the Giboyers, had been robust, substantial targets, whose conduct was agreed to be resoundingly wrong, giving rise to a frank, confident, tonic laughter. In contrast, Meilhac and Halévy's scepticism was so general that they avoided committing themselves to any implied moral position, and it was hard to know what they believed in, if indeed they believed in anything.

Their characters, too, were elusive: instead of being wrong-headed with gusto, they were simply artificial and effete, lacking conviction even in their follies and their sins. Indeed, one of the main sources of humour offered by Meilhac and Halévy, and by such later dramatists as Ancey, Capus and Tristan Bernard, was their characters' contemptible weakness. The laughter provoked by such stunted souls was probably at least as loud, but somehow less expansive and cordial than before.

It was precisely in relation to the later works of Labiche and of Meilhac and Halévy that Zola began to postulate a new kind of comedy and a new quality of laughter towards the end of 1876. Writing of the hilarious but wild comic invention shown in Meilhac and Halévy's Le Prince, he observed:

Elle arrive comme une flamme, elle a créé certainement tout un comique nouveau. (...) Je viens de dire que la fantaisie avait créé, dans notre littérature dramatique, un nouveau comique. Le mot me paraît très juste. (...) Lorsque Escouloubine, dans Le Prince, fait un second gentilhomme campagnard devant Mme Cardinet effarée, on éclate d'un accès de rire nerveux, et il semble qu'on vienne de recevoir un coup de bâton sur la nuque. C'est que la situation est impossible; elle est une pure fantaisie des auteurs, une imagination extraordinaire dont la folie devient communicative. On mourrait de ce rire-là, s'il durait trop longtemps.<sup>26</sup>

A few weeks later, reviewing Labiche and Duru's La Clé, he returned to the same idea, commenting that the play's comedy was too far-fetched and would have been more effective if it had kept in touch with reality, and adding:

Certes, cela n'exclurait pas la fantaisie; seulement, il faudrait une base solide, pour asseoir les extravagances de cette gaieté nerveuse, qui paraît devoir être le comique moderne.<sup>27</sup>

It seems, then, that Zola felt there was a new species of comedy, characterized by an unbridled fantasy which aimed at what he nicely termed a rire à outrance. The description prompts several reactions. First, it is a strikingly accurate anticipation of one kind of fin-de-siècle comedy, represented for instance by Feydeau's vaudevilles. Second, it suggests that flight from reality into the realms of pure play which Ortega y Gasset proposed as one of the defining traits of modernism in La Deshumanización del arte. The most arresting and informative thing of all, though, was Zola's phraseology in these two passages, which so plainly indicated his ambivalence towards the "new" laughter. His words ascribed to it a rather unpleasant, stressful and even dangerous quality which made it quite unlike the natural and wholesome merriment arising from "la belle humeur".

He was certainly not the only nineteenth-century commentator who felt ill at ease with this sort of humour. Parigot, for instance, has left a most graphic description of how Meilhac and Halévy's comedy affected him:

Cela est agile, minutieux, gracieux et crispant.  
 (...) Cette verve et ces voix blanches me gênent.  
 Ces traits d'ironie sournoise et de fausse  
 naïveté entrent en moi comme autant de pointes  
 sèches. Cette grimace du sentiment me pique et  
 m'énervé.<sup>28</sup>

It is apparent that "dehumanization" was the cause of his uneasiness, too; specifically, the absence of any spontaneous feelings, which (if they existed at all) were hidden behind a defensive screen of artificiality and irony. It might be recalled that Parigot considered that this was Becque's besetting flaw, too: "Ils sont gais; il est amer: mais amertume et gaieté sont pareillement armées d'une ironie

indifférente."<sup>29</sup>

Sensibility was out of style. Even so highly emotional a nature as Renard can often be seen, both in the Journal and in his "Parisian" comedies, striving to maintain that light air of detachment which was the new bon ton. For the tendency to shy away from deep feelings was identified by contemporaries as something characteristically modern. Lemaître wrote of the characters in Meilhac and Ganderax' Pepa: "D'aujourd'hui encore, - oh! oui, terriblement d'aujourd'hui, - cette peur du drame, ce refus de s'émouvoir et de nous émouvoir, et même de nous attendrir."<sup>30</sup>

As this implied, the cool style of comedy required a special sort of response from the public. Formerly, the playgoer (like any self-respecting Parisian) had fancied himself shrewd and nobody's fool, yet possessed of a good heart withal. Certain stock emotional responses had been not only permitted him but expected of him in the theatre. To "lack heart" had been unequivocally a vice in those days. Yet now the comedy in vogue presented casual lightness and sceptical equanimity as elegant and sophisticated qualities, and to be the naïve and sentimental dupe of one's own emotions passed for mortifying folly. In consequence, the sheepish spectator was inhibited from showing approval, admiration or respect for anything or anybody by the fear of appearing candide, which was now a pejorative term.<sup>31</sup>

The irony which was so prevalent in the comic theatre at the close of the century also contributed little to the spectator's comfort, for irony is double-edged in a way that the comic proper is not.<sup>32</sup> By definition, the ironist does not say what he really thinks.<sup>33</sup> In consequence, it is almost

impossible for his audience to be fully satisfied that his affable collusion with them means they are excluded from the censure and ridicule of his inmost thoughts, that while he is laughing with them he is not also laughing at them.<sup>34</sup>

This possibility lent the laughter produced by the ironical comedy a faintly wary and tentative quality, significantly different from the carefree and self-assured gaiety which Perrichon, Les Dominos roses or Le Homard afforded. With plays like those, the spectator had known exactly where he stood.

Yet if the sceptical and ironical variety of comedy slightly ruffled the self-possession of the public, it was obviously far worse affected by the comédie rosse and by Jarry. Although diametrically opposed in other respects, one being of a Naturalist and the other of a Symbolist complexion, these two styles were alike in denying audiences the wonted comfort of assuming that the playwright wanted their endorsement or valued their good-will. Formerly, even in most satire, a tactful convention had stipulated that the spectator and the satirist were allies, both laughing at the man in the next seat; but the aggressive insolence of Jarry and of réalisme rosse gave no guarantees that present company was necessarily excepted.

This "humour" was like a travesty of traditional comedy.<sup>35</sup> Instead of enjoying (from a safe distance) a Hobbesian sense of "sudden glory" at the exposure of another's inferiority, the general public felt discomfited, as if it were they who were the butt of a "laughter of exclusion" shared by the author with his cronies, apparently bent on turning comedy inside out and vindicating the values of a deviant minority

at the expense of the accepted norms of society.

Some laughed at the comédie rosse, and even at Ubu roi; but there is little enough of "la belle humeur" in the mirth that is offered to the Savage God.<sup>36</sup> For laughter is of various kinds,<sup>37</sup> and does not always betoken cheerfulness and a sense of well-being. Some laughter may even result from personal anxieties: the laughter which denies one is the original of the caricature, that which proclaims the unshockable good sport, that which guards against being thought obtuse or humourless, and even the pre-emptive laugh at oneself. Increasingly, comedy seemed to provoke the rire nerveux of audiences on the defensive.

It would be an undertaking quite beyond the scope of this study to try to account for the general crisis of self-confidence which appears to have occurred in France during the nineteenth century and to be associated with the trend from tranquil "belle humeur" to the various brittle kinds of comedy of the fin de siècle. Receiving Maurice Donnay at the Académie Française on 19 December 1907, Paul Bourget suggested the taut, galvanic humour of comedies such as Donnay's was an after-effect of the Franco-Prussian war:

Cette gaieté spasmodique et qui tient de la névropathie, fut celle d'une jeunesse qui eut ses vingt ans en des heures troublées de l'histoire et dans un pays déjà vieux. On ne s'amuse pas du même coeur lorsqu'on appartient à une nation victorieuse et quand on est l'enfant d'un peuple vaincu, quand on a grandi dans un milieu ordonné et fixe ou bien dans un milieu instable, bouleversé par les pires ferments d'anarchie, quand on se sent emporté par un vaste mouvement de joie et d'esperance ou bien quand on participe aux découragements d'un âge d'universelle critique et de lassitude.<sup>38</sup>

It has been contended above that this mode of humour actually had its roots in the pre-war period, as shown by

certain comedies of Labiche and of Meilhac and Halévy; but this certainly would not rule out the possibility that the conditions outlined by Bourget fostered the development of a comedy that was wary and sceptical, and even cynical.

If, as Jacques Barzun has written, "To admire nothing, for fear of being duped, is a progressive disease of the spirit,"<sup>39</sup> one might have thought, to judge by much of the comedy of the fin de siècle, that this modern malady was already well advanced, were it not for the eloquent triumph of Cyrano de Bergerac. When a playwright who boldly wore his own heart on his sleeve did invite the public to feel, and believe, and admire once more, the response was phenomenal.

Furthermore, as late as 1894 Soubies was able to state that all the greatest successes at the Comédie-Française since the war were by authors who had made their name under the Second Empire.<sup>40</sup> There was much that was new in the theatre, but the strength of conservative taste should not be underestimated.

For finally the salient characteristic of the French comic theatre during these thirty years, and that which gives it much of its interest, is that it was so heterogeneous, comprising a curious variety of styles, from anachronistic survivals to prodromes of "modernism", and catering to a range of very diverse publics.

It would seem that the Frenchman of the period 1870-1900 still "laughed a great deal", though his laughter might spring from the joyous optimism of Cyrano, the old-fashioned "belle humeur" of Gondinet and Bisson, the pure ludic verve of Feydeau, the sardonic satire of the comédie rosse, the grotesque graffiti of Jarry or the sceptical persiflage of the light comedy. Laughter, Carlyle said, is "the cypher-



key, wherewith we decypher the whole man." Perhaps an attentive study of their theatrical humour can tell us something of the complex temper of those times.

## Conclusion

1. Haffter, "Labiche et la rhétorique", 46.
2. Gaiffe, v-vi.
3. Descotes, Le Public de théâtre, 10.
4. Gaiffe, 6 & 267.
5. Auguste Adolphe Lemoine, alias Montigny (1805-1880). Originally an actor at Comédie-Française, Nouveautés and Ambigu and author of melodramas. Manager of Gaîté 1838. Manager of Gymnase from 1844 until his death. "Ceux qui ont vu le vieux Montigny dans son fauteuil, à l'avant-scène, bourru, le sourcil froncé, faisant recommencer dix fois, vingt fois le même passage, rompant les plus durs, les plus rebelles, toujours insatisfait, s'acharnant au mieux, ceux-là peuvent se vanter d'avoir connu un vrai directeur de théâtre." (Daudet, Quarante ans de Paris, 169) In his notes to Céard's Lettres inédites à Emile Zola (48, Note 3), Burns gave Montigny's birth-date as 1812.
6. Dated 24 October 1893 and published in Le Théâtre Libre (1893-94 Season).
7. Peter, Le Théâtre et la vie, 2, 164.
8. Elizabeth Burns, 84.
9. "The word plaudite at the end of a Roman comedy, the invitation to the audience to form part of the comic society, would seem rather out of place at the end of a tragedy. The resolution of comedy comes, so to speak, from the audience's side of the stage..." (Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 164.
10. Cook, 44.
11. This fact underlay Béhar's thesis in "L'Avant-garde comme relativité généralisée."
12. Gaiffe, 253.
13. Pia, 493. Cf. Baty, 318.
14. Gaiffe, 253.
15. Cf. Sutton, 154.
16. Ernest-Charles, 154.
17. Gaiffe, 249.
18. "A tout prendre, si l'on cherche, un jour, ce que fut le théâtre de ce siècle, c'est de la comédie qu'on devra s'occuper." (Lhomme, La Comédie d'aujourd'hui, 174)
19. Gaiffe, 250. One is reminded of Barzun's expression "the

- obligatory sense of humour of our time." (Barzun, 121)
20. Howarth, 14. Cf. Gaiffe, 267: "Il existe un style du rire, comme il y a un style poétique, architectural ou musical."
  21. Lemaître, Impressions, 7, 166.
  22. Soupault, 73. In his edition of Labiche's Théâtre, 1 (Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1979), Sigaux, too, classed Le Point de mire with Célimare and Le Prix Martin as "des pièces singulièrement 'dures'." (24)
  23. Autrusseau's suggestion (Autrusseau, 153) that the relationship between Martin and Agénor was homosexual seems needlessly heavy-handed. It would fit the facts equally well to see in it another instance of that effectively asexual "male-bonding" which Judith Miller detected in Vingt-neuf degrés à l'ombre. (Miller, 453)
  24. Autrusseau, 137.
  25. Parigot, 331.
  26. In Le Bien public, 4 December 1876.
  27. In Le Bien public, 15 January 1877.
  28. Parigot, 336.
  29. Ibid.
  30. Lemaître, Impressions, 4, 295.
  31. See, for example, the opening exchanges of Act II scene iv of Meilhac & Halévy's Le Réveillon.
  32. Victoria maintained that the average spectator was bound to be uncomfortable with the ambiguity inherent in irony: "Pues al hombre cotidiano no le gusta tener más de una opinión sobre cada cosa. Y el ironista por definición se entretiene en abrirle un abismo a su derecha, otro abismo a su izquierda, venderle los ojos y decirle: 'Marche, usted.'" (Victoria, 145) See also Müller, 65.
  33. See Victoria 144-45, & 145, Note 1.
  34. Cook noted that when irony occurred in comedy, "the butt of the joke can be either the abnormal character type or a member of the audience." (Cook, 45)
  35. Taking the function of traditional comedy to be that of conservative social regulator, as proposed (with variations) by Bergson, Cook, Sully, Swabey, etc.
  36. If the Savage God has a name, it is surely Yuk, symbol of the grotesque and the absurd, derider of human dignity. (See Enid Starkie, Flaubert: the Making of the Master. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971. 48-49) It is interesting

that Smarh appears to have been originally intended for the stage (Ibid, 49).

37. Herein lies the flaw in the many attempts to assign all laughter to a single cause, like Bergson's theory. See Victoria, 82; Boston, 28-59; Müller, 47; Swabey, 2.
38. Bourget's argument (and indeed his vocabulary) seem to point to a belief that fin de siècle ironic comedy and the Decadent movement were not simply contemporaneous but somehow congeneric. Their precise relation is not clear; but there seem to be hints of "decadence" in Meilhac & Halévy. See also Newman-Gordon, 12.
39. Barzun, 123.
40. Soubies, La Comédie-Française, 147. Adolphe Brisson appeared to take a different view of the company's post-war repertory in Le Théâtre et les mœurs, 337; but its comic productions, at least, bear out Soubies's claim.

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